

no orchids for
miss blandish

Over half a million
copies sold

by james
hadley chase

No Orchids for Miss Blandish


The story of Miss Blandish needs no introduction. Over half a million copies of the book have been sold. More than seven million people have read it.

In the past twenty-five years no other character in fiction has so gripped the public imagination. The B.B.C. has mentioned Miss Blandish. Many reviews and plays have burlesqued her. Her name has become as familiar to the public as any of the great Hollywood stars. She has been accepted as a household word.

This edition of *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* is based on the play of the same title licensed by the Lord Chamberlain, presented by George Black, and dramatized by James Hadley Chase and Robert Nesbitt, with an additional dialogue by Val Guest.

"Once or twice in a generation someone writes a book that establishes a new standard in literature; a book that starts a new trend of fashion; a book that everyone knows and talks about and which several million people read. And one which must certainly be included in that class is the world-famous *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*."—*SUNDAY DISPATCH*.

"It is doubtful if the vile ruthlessness of gangsterism has ever been more vividly presented in fiction. The sufferings and ultimate fate of the kidnapped Miss Blandish leave one gasping."—*LIVERPOOL POST*.



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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Dead Stay Dumb

Twelve Chinks and a Woman

Miss Shumway Waves a Wand

Eve

I'll Get You For This

The Flesh of the Orchid

You Never Know With Women

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by
JAMES HADLEY CHASE

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I

It began on a summer morning in July. The sun up early in the morning mist, and the pavements were already steaming a little from the heavy dew. The air in the streets was stale and lifeless. It had been an exhausting month of intense heat, rainless skies, and warm, dust-laden winds.

Bailey walked into Minny's hash-house, leaving Old Sam asleep in the Packard. Bailey was feeling lousy. Hard liquor and heat don't mix. His mouth felt like a birdcage and his eyes were gritty.

Minny's was empty when he entered. It was still early and the woman had only just got through with wiping over the floor. He picked his way over the damp boards, wrinkling his nose a little at the stale smell of cooking and sweat that hung about the place.

The blonde leaning over the counter gave him a smile. It made Bailey think of a piano. She had worked on herself until, from a distance, she looked as good as any movie-star. When you got close, she wasn't so hot. She patted her tight, yellow curls and stretched. Bailey thought she was wearing a false front.

"'Morning," she said. "It's going to be hot. Gee! What a night! Ain't this heat wicked?"

Bailey scowled at her and ordered a Scotch. She slapped the bottle on the counter and pushed the glass towards him.

"You've been hitting the gong last night," she said. "I'm clairvoyant." And she giggled.

Bailey would like to have told her what he really thought she was, but it was too much trouble. He took the bottle and glass and walked over to a table. Slowly he let himself down on to a chair. He looked at the blonde, who was watching him curiously.

"Find something to do," he said, "and leave me alone."

"Aw, be yourself, Clark Gable," she said, once more spreading herself over the counter. "What's bitin' you?"

"Give your mouth a rest," he said, turning his back on her.

She shrugged and went back to her novelette. Bailey gave himself a long drink and felt better. He leaned back in the chair and tipped his hat over his eyes. He was getting worried. Riley was gut-aching about dough. If they didn't get a break soon, they'd have to stick up another bank. Bailey wasn't so keen on busting banks now that the G-men were knocking around. Things were getting tough. If something didn't happen fast, they'd be on relief. From where he sat he could see Old Sam snoring in the Packard. Bailey sneered at the sleeping man. That guy was a pain in the neck. All he thought about was his next meal and his next sleep. It was up to Riley or himself to turn something up. He took another drink and gave himself a cigarette. The Scotch reminded him that he'd got a stomach and he looked over his shoulder for the blonde.

"Hey, juicy fruit," he said. "Don't I get service in this dump?"

She walked over to him with her hands on her hips. She stood close to his elbow. "I thought that was a hard breakfast you'd picked on," she said, eying the Scotch. "What'll you have?"

"Ham an' eggs," he said, poking at her with his finger. She was too quick for him and jerked away.

"Be your age, Romeo," she said. "You want building up before you start lying down."

Bailey grinned as he watched her flounce to the stove. She broke the eggs into the pan with a practised flip and slapped a thick slice of ham on the grill.

While he waited, Heinie came in. Bailey waved to him and Heinie's fat face split into a rubbery grin. He waddled over as fast as his short legs could carry him and sat down gingerly in the chair Bailey had pushed forward to him. He began to blot his face with a dirty handkerchief.

"Jeeze! Ain't it hot?" he said, putting his greasy hat under the chair.

"What's new?" Bailey asked.

"Gimme a drink," Heinie said, his little eyes fixed on the bottle.

Bailey poured him out a stiff one and watched him drink it thoughtfully. Heinie was a good guy. He had his ear to the ground and passed on any dope he picked up. He was an outside man to a society rag that ran blackmail on the side.

"How are you hittin' 'em?" he asked with a friendly leer. "Things goin' good for you?"

"Lousy," Bailey said, tossing his cigarette butt on the floor. "We ain't had a break in weeks. Why, hell!—even horses are ratting on us."

Heinie wagged his fat head. "Yeah," he said, "you're right. What can you expect in this heat?" He leaned forward, lowering his voice. "I heard Pontiac was a cinch."

Bailey sneered. "Pontiac? Listen, that horse's a fugitive from a merry-go-round."

Heinie looked hurt. "You're wrong," he said. "They spent a heap of jack on that horse. You ought to get on to him."

"Forget it!" Bailey said shortly. "The last tip you gave me set me back five bucks. Pontiac!" He poured himself out another drink in disgust.

The blonde came over with his order. She nodded to Heinie. "You eatin' or just sittin'?" she said.

Heinie scowled at her. "I don't go off my feed because it's hot," he said. "Gimme a steak."

Bailey waited with impatience while Heinie went on to tell the blonde how he wanted the steak cooked, and how many onions he wanted with it. When she had left them again, Bailey picked up the threads.

"What's doin' these days?" he asked. "Riley's sweatin' about dough. Can't you horn us in on somethin'?"

Heinie shook his head. "Not a chance," he said. "I ain't been doin' a thing. Tonight I've the only job I've had in weeks. I got to cover the Blandish story, an' that's only worth a few bucks."

"Blandish? Ain't he the meat king?"

"Yeah." Heinie was getting impatient for his food. He kept glancing over his shoulder at the blonde. The smell of the onions was driving him crazy. "Ain't it a knock-out how I can eat in this weather?" he went on, showing interest in himself.

"Most guys just fold up and drink, but it don't worry me."

Bailey finished his meal and sat back. "What's Blandish in the news for?" he asked, picking his teeth with a splinter of wood.

"It ain't Blandish, it's his daughter. Ever seen her? Now there's a dame! What a shape she's got on her bones. She'd make even a horse look over its shoulder."

Bailey wasn't interested, but Heinie, once started, was difficult to stop. He wriggled his fat behind more firmly into the chair and spread his fat little hands on the table.

"She's gettin' the family ice outa hock tonight," he said. "There's to be a swell party an' she's hanging fifty grand round her neck to celebrate."

"Fifty grand?" Bailey suddenly leaned forward.

"Yeah. Fifty G's goes round that little white neck tonight," Heinie said, smiling smugly. "An' I've gotta write it up for ten lousy bucks."

The blonde came over with the steak and put it in front of Heinie. It looked good and he rubbed his hands. He patted the blonde's wrist, nodding his head at her. She snatched her arm away. "Don't get fresh," she said sharply, going back to the counter.

While Heinie got into a huddle with his food, Bailey sat thinking. A necklace worth fifty grand sounded like a big job. He creased his brows and wondered if Riley would have the nerve to go after it. He glanced quickly at Heinie, who was eating noisily.

"Know if this dame's goin' straight home after the party?" he asked suddenly.

Heinie paused, his fork near his mouth. "What's bitin' you?" he said suspiciously.

"Just curious, that's all." Bailey looked at him with a dead pan.

Heinie had to talk. "I got it from MacGowan's man——" he began.

"MacGowan?" Bailey interrupted. "Where does he fit in?"

"Ain't you heard of him?" Heinie looked shocked. "You

don't get about, do you? This guy's one of our rich playboys. He's got hot pants for this dame. His man told me that he's taking her to the Golden Slipper to hear Louis swing it after the celebrations."

"Just the two of them, huh?" Bailey said thoughtfully.

Heinie looked worried. "For Pete's sake don't start anything," he said. "This is big stuff, Bailey, it don't suit your type of outfit."

Bailey grinned at him. Heinie thought he looked like a wolf. "Take it easy," he said. "I ain't startin' nothin'."

Heinie stared at him, but Bailey met his eyes without a flicker. Then he slapped Heinie on the shoulder. "Snap out of it, you lug," he said. "You don't have to get steamed up. Forget it, will you?" He looked over his shoulder and signalled to the blonde. He settled his check and stood up.

"Be seein' you," he said.

"You're in a sudden hurry, ain't you?" Heinie asked. Small wrinkles creased his face.

"Old Sam's out in the wagon. I left him pounding his ear, but I guess he's about through by now. Jeeze! What a lousy night I had. Did you ever know such heat?"

Heinie relaxed a trifle. He felt safer talking about the weather. "Sure, it was hell, an' it's gonna be worse today."

Bailey waved and walked over to the door. As he passed the blonde he aimed a slap at her, but she twisted like a lizard. "Aw, be your age." They both said it together, Bailey mimicking her voice. She squealed with laughter and Bailey grinned. He walked into the street. The heat hit him like a clenched fist. The haze on the road made him feel a little dizzy. He walked slowly over to the Packard.

So the Blandish diamonds were coming to the surface again. Every little mobster in town would be sitting up, licking his lips, when the news got round. With Heinie, news got round mighty quick. He let everyone in on everything. Heinie had no favourites; he was a right guy all right.

Bailey found Old Sam still snoring. He looked at him with a grimace, and then turned into a near-by drug-store and shut himself in with a telephone. He dialled and began speaking

with Riley. He hurriedly explained what Heinie had told him. Riley seemed half-dead at the other end of the line. Bailey had left him in bed with Anna, and he was surprised that he answered the telephone at all. He could tell that Riley was sore about something.

"Hold on, will you?" Riley said suddenly. "This floozie's shouting an' I can't hear what you're saying. Wait a minute."

Bailey could hear Anna's voice strident with fury. Then he heard Riley's bellow and the sound of a sharp slap. Bailey grinned to himself. Riley and Anna fought all day—just for the fun of it. Bailey thought it must be the way they were made. Riley came back to the telephone again.

"Listen, Frankie," Bailey pleaded. "It's hot in this box. Will you pin your ears back? I wantta get out quick."

Riley began to beef about the heat at his end.

"Okay, okay," Bailey broke in. "So it's hot your end; but it's murder here. I say it's murder in here. Yeah! Murder! No, you dope, I ain't done murder. I say it's murder in here . . . in this box. Aw, skip it, will you? No! Forget the heat. Will you listen, before I croak? The Blandish diamonds are coming outta hock. Yeah, that's what I said. . . . The Blandish diamonds . . . fifty grand worth of ice. That's right. Sure, tonight. The dame's wearing 'em at a party. She's goin' on to the Golden Slipper with a guy called MacGowan. What do you think? There'll only be the two of 'em."

"Beat it back here." Riley seemed suddenly alive. "We gotta talk this over. Make it snappy."

"Okay." Bailey grinned into the mouthpiece. Riley was not so yellow as he thought. "I'm on my way." He hung up, paused while he lit a cigarette, and then walked into the street. The air seemed cool after the booth and he walked with quick strides to the Packard. He reached inside and jerked Old Sam roughly out of his sleep. "Wake up, sluggard," he said, sliding under the wheel, "things are poppin'."

Bailey picked his way self-consciously past the crowded

tables. The Golden Slipper was doing great business. Waiters moved backwards and forwards like well-oiled machines, carrying trays shoulder high. The noise of incessant chatter struggled with the blare of the band. The air was thick with smoke and it was difficult to see across the room. Bailey felt awkward and irritable. It was like Riley to give him the inside job to do. He sat down at a small table and snarled at a waiter who approached doubtfully. He ordered a highball, and while the man went away to fetch it he looked round the room. It was early and he knew that Miss Blandish had not arrived. He'd never seen her, and he wondered if he could spot the table that must have been reserved for her. He could see nothing in the haze, and he gave up with an irritable shrug. He was glad to have the highball. He sat there for some time, smoking, drinking and wondering how Riley liked waiting outside with Old Sam in the Packard. Then suddenly the drummer ran off a roll and the leader of the band came to the mike.

"Just a word in your ears, ladies and gentlemen," he said, his voice blaring through the room. "Miss Blandish is now arriving with our old friend Mr. Jerry MacGowan. It's the little lady's birthday, and she's here to have a good time. Give her a big hand when she comes in, but don't crowd her. A little bird tells me that she'll be wearing the famous diamonds, so, ladies, here's a chance to see them."

Bailey screwed his head round quickly and looked towards the entrance. Every head in the room was turned in the same direction. A bright, white spotlight picked her out as she came in, followed by a tall young man, who grinned into the haze, waving his hand to unseen friends. Bailey watched her as she came down the aisle between the tables. He had heard about her looks and had often wondered just how good she was. Now that he saw her for the first time he drew in his breath sharply. The light caught her red-gold hair and reflected back on her white skin. Bailey sat gaping. He had seen plenty of good-lookers in his day, but Miss Blandish caught him by the throat.

She was unspoiled. That got him more than anything else.

She just wasn't like any of the girls he had run into before. She had everything they had and then a lot more. He watched her wave gaily to the crowd shouting and stamping around her. He didn't relax until the row had died down and she had seated herself, with MacGowan, not far from him. He watched them closely, his eyes on the diamonds. They did things to him too. He had seen plenty of jewels in his day, but this collar of flashing stones made him sweat. He began to realize that this job was going to be big. They wouldn't get away with this easily. He could imagine how tough Blandish would get with the cops. As soon as the news broke every copper in the State would be on his toes. Bailey wiped off his hands.

Maybe they were crazy to pull a job like this. Blandish had millions and he'd raise hell. Bailey gave himself a drink and tried to relax. What would Riley say if he went out and told him to throw in his hand? He shrugged. No, that wouldn't do. Riley would get sore. He'd have to go through with it.

The band suddenly cut out with that slick precision of a well-trained troupe and let the clarinet and drums swing it. The clarinet fluttered the reed, dragging down the top register. The drummer, his eyes dazed and bloodshot, jittered the gong. The floor was small and crowded. The scrape of leather was as rhythmic as the wire brush on the trap-top. The ceiling lights dimmed and someone began raking the crowd with a spot, picking out the white faces of the dancers.

Bailey saw that MacGowan was carrying a load. He was drinking steadily, and when he danced he lurched badly. Miss Blandish spoke to him, and they went back to their table. This interested Bailey. He watched Miss Blandish talking to MacGowan. He could tell she was trying to get MacGowan to ease up on the liquor, but he was already drunk enough to be obstinate. She suddenly shrugged and turned her shoulder away from him. This annoyed him and he emptied his glass, refilling it immediately.

The crowd was getting rowdy. Suddenly some rough stuff broke out at one of the tables. A college boy began shouting at his black-haired companion. She leant forward suddenly and slapped his face. Everyone began looking at them. The college

boy, wild-eyed, grabbed her arms. A crowd gathered round, laughing as they wrestled. The girl screamed until the roof quivered. Bailey thought uneasily that the vice squad would be along pretty soon. He looked across at Miss Blandish. He saw that she was already standing. She was shaking MacGowan's arm impatiently. MacGowan got to his feet unsteadily and followed her down the aisle.

No one but Bailey noticed them leave. Bailey hurried out. His broad shoulders jostled the crowd standing on the wooden terrace admiring the moon. A drunk, turning to protest, sobered when he caught Bailey's eye.

"What's cooking?" he asked feebly.

"With a pot like yours, it could be a six-course dinner," Bailey said softly. "Get out of my way, you string-gutted monkey."

The drunk swam away into the darkness.

Bailey walked quickly down the drive and on to the highway. The Packard moved out of the shadows and he climbed into the back. Old Sam was at the wheel. Riley was at his side.

"They'll be out in a minute," Bailey said hurriedly. "She'll be drivin'. The fella's stewed to the gills."

"Drive as far as the farm we passed comin' and then park," Riley said to Old Sam. "We'll let 'em overtake us and then crowd 'em into a ditch."

Old Sam engaged the gear and the Packard slid away. Bailey lit a cigarette and pulled a gun from his shoulder-holster. He laid it on the seat beside him. There was plenty of power under the hood and Old Sam knew just how to nurse the crate along. The farmhouse was on the next bend, so he stalled the engine and ran into a deep shadow.

Riley spoke over his shoulder. "Get into the road and watch for 'em."

Bailey took his gun and, tossing his cigarette away, stepped on to the road. His feet crunched on the loose gravel as he walked a short distance to clear the bend. He stood on the side of the road, watching. In the distance the lights of the roadhouse gleamed in the darkness. Faintly, he could hear the band still swinging hot rhythm. He waited there immovable for

several minutes, then, turning suddenly, he ran back to the car.

"Okay," he said, "here they come."

Old Sam started the engine. As the hum of the approaching car came nearer he engaged the gear. The Packard slid into motion, and as Miss Blandish drove past they fell in behind.

"Let her get a bit further on," Riley said, "then crowd her."

The road was lonely, with heavily wooded country ahead of them. They were waiting for that. The beam of their headlights clung to the back of Miss Blandish's car. They could see Jerry MacGowan's head through the rear window. He was slumped back and he rolled with the motion of the car.

"That punk ain't goin' to give trouble," Bailey said.

Riley grunted.

The next bend brought them to the woods. The road was pitch black.

"Crowd 'em," Riley said.

The speedometer showed sixty. The needle quivered and then crawled to sixty-five, and then on to sixty-seven. The Packard held the road without any roll. The wind began to whistle and the trees looked smudged. The distance between the cars remained the same.

"Sweet suffering Pete," Riley said, looking at Old Sam.

Old Sam shoved the pedal to the boards. They crept up a few yards and then fell away. Bailey leaned forward, his hands gripping the back of the front seat.

"What the hell are you playing at?" he shouted. "She's wise to us. In another mile she'll be in the clear."

Muttering savagely under his breath, Old Sam clung to the wheel as the needle flickered to eighty. The gap was closing. The two cars began to sway a little on the rough surface of the road. Suddenly Old Sam saw his chance as they approached a fork in the road. He jammed on his brakes and flung the wheel over. The tyres screamed on the gravel and the Packard turned broadside on, skidding into the rough. Bailey was flung to the floorboards. He felt the Packard lurch, the off-wheels rise and then slam back on the road. The car quivered as Old Sam

released the brake and trod hard on the gas, then it bumped and tore through the shrubs. Miss Blandish kept to the road. She had to come right round the crown while Old Sam had cut through the rough and had come out ahead of her.

Bailey scrambled back to his seat, swearing hard. He groped savagely for his gun and found it on the floor. Old Sam was forcing Miss Blandish to slow down. He zigzagged about the road so that she could not pass, gradually reducing speed. Finally the two cars came to a standstill, the Packard broadside across the road. Bailey jumped out and walked over to the other car. He poked his gun at Miss Blandish.

"Come on out," he said—"this is a stick-up."

Riley didn't move from the Packard. He leant forward, his shoulder and arm out of the window, and watched. Old Sam chewed as he stared into the headlights of the car. He didn't even bother to look.

Miss Blandish couldn't see Bailey's face. He was standing in the shadow of the car, but the reflection of the headlights picked out the dull metal of his gun. She opened the door and stepped on to the road. There are ways in which a woman leaves a car. Some get out with a show of leg, others don't. Miss Blandish didn't. She stood quite still, holding on to the car door, looking at Bailey with startled eyes. She was not scared, but badly startled. MacGowan called out from the car, raising his head with difficulty. He pulled himself out beside Miss Blandish. Bailey's arm stiffened. The gun suddenly became menacing.

"Take it easy, fella," Bailey said—"this is a stick-up."

MacGowan sobered. He eased himself closer to Miss Blandish. "You'd better be careful," he said hoarsely.

"We want the necklace, sister," Bailey said, ignoring him. "Pass it over quick!"

Miss Blandish's hands flew to her throat. She backed away.

Bailey swore softly. He was jittery. Any moment a car might pass. "Cut that stuff," he said savagely, "or you'll get hurt."

As she still backed away, he walked up to her with three quick strides. He had to pass MacGowan, who lammed him

on the side of his head. It was a sweet thing to do, considering the circumstances, but MacGowan was drunk enough to be reckless. The road was uneven and Bailey's foot was off the ground when the blow landed. He went over with a thud.

Miss Blandish gave a little scream, not a loud one, but as if she had screamed to herself. Riley didn't move. He thought Bailey could handle it, but he pushed Old Sam out of the car to watch Miss Blandish. The old man dug his .38 into her ribs. She did not seem to notice him. Her eyes were fixed on Bailey, sprawling in the road. MacGowan stood still, hesitating, instead of jumping in. The gun had shot out of Bailey's hands and vanished into the shadows. The blow jarred him and he crawled to his knees, swearing softly and obscenely. He paused for a moment in that position, looking at MacGowan, who, realizing his lost opportunity, came at him with a rush.

Bailey was up to meet him. He guided his feeble lead over his shoulder and smacked him across the jaw, bringing his wrist down as he did so. MacGowan reeled away, his arms flung wide as he tried to recover his balance. Bailey shuffled after him. He had a small life-preserver in his hand which he always carried up his sleeve. He drove his left into MacGowan's body and, as the boy came forward, he socked him across the eyes and nose with the life-preserver.

Miss Blandish heard the bone go, quite distinctly, like the sharp note of breaking wood. MacGowan folded up. He lay on his back in the road, lit by the headlights of the car, his long legs thrashing in agony as he held his hands to his face. Bailey stood over him and kicked at his head. He still cursed softly. He kicked MacGowan, aiming carefully with his foot drawn back, then kicking very hard. Riley leant further out of the car.

Miss Blandish made a movement as if she wanted to go to him, but the gun in her side dug deeper. She couldn't scream. Her tongue curled in her mouth. She could not even shut her eyes. She just stood and looked.

Suddenly Riley stiffened and opened the car door. Bailey was still kicking at MacGowan. The sound of his boot was no

longer sharp; it was dull, as if he were kicking dough. Riley came across very quickly. He shoved him away. They all looked at the tattered dummy that had once breathed and lived. Riley took a deep breath.

"You sonofabitch!" he said.

Bailey began to wipe his boots in the long grass. He was jerking like a wire doll. Old Sam still stood near Miss Blandish, but his gun hung by his side. He was scared. Miss Blandish had covered her eyes. She was shivering as if she were very cold.

Riley went on one knee. He touched MacGowan gingerly with a shaky hand. "He's dead," he said. Then he looked over at Bailey. "You crazy punk! You've started something . . . this's a murder rap now . . . do you hear?" His face was white and glistening with sweat.

Bailey hooked his finger in his collar and jerked at it savagely. "He asked for it," he snarled. "Didn't he ask for it?" He turned his head, looking at Old Sam for support.

Old Sam wouldn't look at him.

The three men stood staring at MacGowan. Murder was new to them. They were badly scared.

Riley controlled his quivering nerves with an effort. He moved slowly over to Miss Blandish. She felt him coming and snatched her hands from her face.

"No row!" Riley snarled at her, almost crazy with fear. "I'll smash you if you squawk!"

Miss Blandish wanted to be sick. She thought he was going to kill her.

"Stay still and don't make a move," Riley said.

Bailey came over and pulled at his arm. "She's gotta go the same way," he said, keeping his voice low. "She's seen everything. We gotta knock her off."

Riley pushed him away. "Pipe down," he said, trying to think. "You've started enough trouble for one night." He stared at Miss Blandish, letting his eyes soak in her beauty. Already an idea was forming in his mind. If he killed her, he'd have the diamonds. He could get fifteen grand for them if he was lucky. If he kidnapped her, he might pick up a lot more

dough. Kidnapping was a risky game. So was murder. Whatever happened, he'd fry if they caught up with him. He suddenly decided to take the risk.

"She's comin' with us," he said.

Miss Blandish waved her hands at him, imploring him to keep away, but he came towards her. The touch of his cold, damp hands on her bare arms galvanized her into life. She jerked away from him and opened her mouth to scream. He shifted his feet, and his fist, half-closed, hit her on the jaw. She sagged at the knees and he dragged her over to the Packard. He tossed her into the back seat and looked over his shoulder at the other two.

"Shove the stiff into the car and drive into the woods," he shouted. "Get goin'."

Old Sam helped Bailey get MacGowan into Miss Blandish's car and drove it through the rough until it was hidden from the road. They came back to the Packard in a hurry.

"How's about the broad?" Bailey asked, leaning into the car.

"Get in an' shut your trap," Riley snarled at him.

Bailey hesitated. "What's this?" he demanded again. "You ain't goin' to snatch her, are you?"

Riley, leaning forward suddenly, grabbed the lapels of Bailey's coat. He twisted them in his fist. "Listen, you cheap mug," he said, biting off each word. "You've pulled a fast one . . . okay, now it's my turn. From now on, you pipe down. I'm the guy who'll do the talkin'. Get it?"

Bailey flinched away from his hard eyes. He stepped back as Riley released him, and straightened his coat; then he got inside beside Old Sam.

"You're crazy," he said feebly. "We ain't the outfit for the snatch game. We're way outta our class, Frankie, and you know it."

Riley wasn't listening. He sat back with Miss Blandish lying at his feet and bit his nails. "Hell!" he thought. "If I ain't goin' to get myself fried, I've gotta watch out." He leant forward so that his arms rested on the back of the front seat.

"Now listen," he said, groping for his words. "This is a murder rap. You suckers ain't gotta thing to lose. If they get us, we'll fry. They'll tie this to us as sure as hell. There ain't a mouthpiece who could spring us once they get us inside. This frill knows all the answers. If we rub her out, her old man will spend every cent to catch up with us. The amount of heat that old guy could dig up would make us dizzy. But, if we hide her up some place and send in a ransom note, we'll stall him off. If we make that note tough enough he won't have the nerve to go after us. So long as we've got this baby, he can't get tough. If he does, we'll knock her off. And listen—when we're ready to skip, he'll have to pay plenty to get her back. Have you got all that into your thick skulls?"

"So you've got it all figured out?" Bailey said. "Do you think the cops ain't goin' to start something?"

"They'll start something, but not much. So long as Blandish keeps quiet, they'll play around. You leave this to me. We'll go out to Johnny's place. He'll hide us up. They won't find us there. It's as good a dump as any."

Bailey started to say something, but shrugged instead.

Old Sam twisted in his seat and began to bellyache, but Riley shouted him down. "Can't you see we ain't got a thing to lose? Use your thick domes! It's an even break! It's the only thing to do."

"It ain't our racket," Bailey said. "We ain't organized for a snatch. Besides, when they turn on the heat——"

Riley jeered. "Get goin', Sam," he said. "I'm handlin' this."

The Packard moved forward, gathering speed until it lurched as Old Sam swung to the bends. The night was dark and they met few cars. As they went on, the roads got worse and they met no one.

Riley pulled Miss Blandish off the floorboards. He propped her up in the corner. He couldn't see her, but his hands went to her throat and he struggled with the clasp of the necklace. The car was lurching, and he could feel her soft skin against his hand. It was only with patience that he unfastened the necklace, but he got it off at last. The hard stones felt good.

After struggling along for years on a few dollars a week, the thought of so much money in his hand made him feel weak.

Bailey turned suddenly and leant into the back of the car.

"Want a light?" he said, switching on a small flash.

The puddle of light fell on the diamonds. They gleamed like a star cluster.

"It knocks you, don't it, to think all this dough can hang round one floozie's neck?" Riley said, moving the necklace so that it caught the light.

Bailey shifted the light so that it fell on Miss Blandish. She was still unconscious. A small bruise showed on her white skin where Riley had hit her. She lay in the corner, huddled up. The black silk wrap was open, showing her white dress. Bailey sucked in a mouthful of hot air.

"Nice dish," he said slowly. "Floozie don't quite describe her, Frankie. I could give her another name."

Riley's thin lips tightened. "Yeah?" he said. "Well, don't go gettin' ideas. All you gotta do is to look on this dame as our future meal-ticket, and that's all, get it?"

Bailey thumbed off the light. "Why, sure," he said. "Just so long as there're no bones in the meal."

"I ain't even scared of bones," was all Riley said.

They had been driving solidly for two hours when Old Sam suddenly called for gas. Every mile or so they had passed a dark farmhouse, and they were now well off the beaten track. The country was rough and hilly. Bailey turned his flash on Miss Blandish. She was quite still, having drifted into a heavy sleep of exhaustion.

"She'll be dumb enough," Riley said. "Go ahead and get some."

They went on until they came to a lonely filling-station. A tall hick came tumbling out of the shack that served as an office and sleeping-quarters. He shot gas into the tank as fast as he could put it there. He was half silly with sleep and did not once look inside the car. As he was screwing the cap home

an Airflow, without lights, slid up to the Packard. It startled the three men. Not one of them had heard it approach. Bailey dropped his hand on his gun.

A tall, heavily built man with a black, snap-brimmed hat pulled low over his eyes got out of the Airflow and looked with interest at the Packard. He saw Bailey's movement and suddenly leant into the car.

"Nervous, ain't you, pal?" he said.

Riley handled it. "Yeah," he said. "He always gets that way before he smacks a guy down."

"Riley, ain't it?" the tall man peered more intently. "Well, well, if it ain't yellow-gutted Frankie, talking like a big-shot."

The three men in the Packard stiffened. They looked across at the Airflow. The thin tube of a tommy-gun had been pushed through the curtains and covered them.

"That you, Eddie?" Riley said through parched lips.

"Yeah, it's Eddie all right," the tall man said. "Flynn's nursing the cannon, so don't go puttin' on any big acts for me. Flynn's mighty nervous when he handles that typewriter. It might go off."

"Listen, Eddie—we don't want trouble." Riley was scared. He thought this was a sweet break to run into a punk like Eddie.

Eddie took a cigarette from a paper carton and struck a match. Riley moved his body to hide Miss Blandish, but Eddie saw her.

"Swell twitchet," he said.

"Sure," Riley returned hastily. "We'll be seein' you some time . . . we gotta beat it . . . shove her along, Sam."

Eddie kept his foot on the running-board.

"You ain't in a hurry to go no place, Frankie. I said she was a swell twitchet."

Riley began to ooze sweat. "I heard you," he said. "What of it?"

"I didn't know you went in for stuff like that," Eddie said. "Kinda quiet, ain't she?"

"She's cock-eyed."

"Is that so? Ain't that too bad? Mind if I have a gander? You know my weakness, don't you, pal?"

"Can't you lay off? We're in a hurry," Riley said weakly.

"I want to look at that broad." There was a sudden rasp in Eddie's voice.

The tommy-gun moved a trifle. The two men stared at each other as their wills clashed, then Riley got out of the car reluctantly. He was a head shorter than Eddie and seemed to shrink a little when the other stood over him. Eddie took a powerful flash from his pocket and flung the beam on Miss Blandish.

"Very nice," he said. "Yeah, you certainly got something there. So she couldn't take her liquor, huh? Ain't that sad?"

Riley fumbled for a cigarette. His hands were twitching with nerves. "Let's skip the comedy, Eddie," he said hoarsely. "We gotta get goin'."

"Sure, Frankie, don't mind me." Eddie stepped back. "Don't do nothin' that'd make my ears red, will you? My ma always told me to leave a dame alone when she was plastered. Believe me, Frankie, my ma was no ordinary woman." He looked at Miss Blandish again. "What a load she must've taken on board. See where she bruised her puss with the neck of the bottle. You oughta tell a nice frill like that to use a glass. Such enthusiasm ain't good style, is it, Frankie?"

Riley climbed back into the car, and Old Sam drove away from the filling-station as if hell were biting his heels.

Eddie watched them go. He pushed his hat over his eyes and scratched the back of his head. The tall hick was gaping at him, but Eddie ignored him. He walked over to the Airflow. He stuck his head through the window.

"What did you make of that, Flynn?" he asked. "It looked phoney to me."

Flynn was dismantling the tommy-gun. He shrugged indifferently. "I wouldn't care a lot," he said.

"No, but then you ain't got brains. What the hell are those cheap mugs doing with a baby like that? Who is she?"

Flynn put the tommy-gun away and looked into the dark-

ness. He couldn't be less interested. They had been driving a long way and he wanted some sleep.

Eddie went on: "She'd taken a sock all right. You don't tell me that a small-time hick like Riley's in the snatch game now. I can't add this up. You know, we may be missin' something. Maybe I'll have a word with Ma."

Flynn lit a cigarette. "Get a hustle on, will yuh?" he pleaded. "I want some sleep, if you don't."

Eddie turned to the tall hick, who seemed to be asleep on his feet. "Hi, you, gotta 'phone somewhere?"

The hick led him into the shack and stood over him while he dialled. Eddie waited impatiently, listening to the crackling and the buzzing on the line; then Doc's sonorous voice boomed in his ear.

"Listen, Doc," Eddie said, then paused. "Wait a minute." He looked at the hick. "Go outside an' grab yourself some air, sonny."

The hick blinked at him and then went away.

"Okay, Doc," Eddie went on. "Riley and his mob have just pulled out of here with a classy dame. She's been socked and she's still counting the milky way. She's no ordinary dame, and she ain't the type to go around with Riley. Everything about her stinks of dough. It looks like Riley's snatched her. Will you tell Ma?"

Doc said: "Maybe she's a show girl and Riley's spending some of the money he hasn't got. All right, I'll tell Ma. Wait a minute, will you?"

He came back to the telephone after a short delay. "Now you have started something," he said. "Ma wants to know what she looked like and what she's wearing."

"She'd lots of red hair, a figure like a bra. advertisement, and enough oomph to give a corpse wicked thoughts. She was wearing a white silk dress and a black wrap. Looks as if she'd been to a hell of a party."

He could hear Doc talking to Ma and he waited impatiently.

"Listen, Eddie," Doc said at last. "Ma says it might be the Blandish girl. She was going to Pine Valley to a night-club

tonight. And she was wearing the Blandish necklace. But surely Riley wouldn't take on a job as big as that?"

Eddie's mind worked quickly. "Maybe Ma's right. I thought she looked familiar. Why, if Riley's got her and the rocks . . . he's got plenty."

Suddenly Ma's harsh, parrot-like voice came over the line. "That you, Eddie? Get this. I'm sending the boys down to Lone Tree junction right away. Pick 'em up there—understand? There's only one hideout Riley'd make for—Johnny's. Take the boys and find out who this girl is. If it's the Blandish girl, bring her back here."

Eddie said: "Anything you say, Ma. Hows about Riley's mob?"

"Use your imagination. Do you want me to tell you everything? Get goin'." And the line went dead.

Eddie hurried out to the Airflow. He tossed the hick a dollar. "Buy yourself a battleship," he said as he climbed into the car. "Come on, Flynn," he said, groping for the ignition. "Ma wants us to check on this Riley angle. She thinks these mugs have snatched the Blandish dame."

Flynn groaned. "She's screwy. Those guys couldn't pull a job like that. Where're we goin', anyway?"

"Johnny's," Eddie said shortly.

Flynn slumped back. "Good-bye, sleep," he said. "Ain't this a sweet life?"

The Airflow roared into the night.

Dawn was breaking over the hills and the Packard still whipped along the roads. Old Sam was huddled at the wheel, his face white and puckered with fatigue. The other two looked nervously through the rear window from time to time to see if they were being followed. They had to get under cover before it was light.

Miss Blandish was awake now. She sat stiffly in the corner, as far as she could get from Riley. She was cold in the scurrying wind that beat round the car as it hurtled on. Riley watched

her with cold eyes. She started to say something, but he told her to keep quiet.

"What a break," he kept muttering to himself. "Eddie of all jerks. If he thinks of it he'll get on to Slim, an' then all hell'll start poppin'."

Bailey was thinking the same. He turned suddenly. "Why not ditch her, Frankie?" he said. "Get wise, can't you?"

"Aw, pipe down," Riley snarled at him. "I know what I'm doing." He pulled his gun and waved it in Bailey's face. "Another crack like that and you'll get it."

Bailey was not impressed. "Okay," he said. "If the Grisson mob get on to us, it's goin' to be just too bad."

"Why should they? Eddie ain't interested in us. Forget the Grisson mob."

"If he tells Ma Grisson, we're sunk," Bailey moaned.

Riley said nothing. He knew Bailey was right. Ma Grisson would know what to do. She always did. He felt sweat break out under his arms.

Old Sam swung the Packard on to a small, narrow dirt track. He reduced speed. They were approaching Johnny's hideout. The shack was a wooden, two-storey affair, screened by trees of a dense wood. Leading to it was a rough path that had been cleared of undergrowth.

The Packard bumped up the path and came to a standstill outside the shack. Bailey got out and hammered on the door.

"Open up, Johnny!" he shouted.

There was a pause, then Johnny came to the door. He looked at them suspiciously.

Johnny was an old guy. His face was the colour of a squashed carrot. Drink had rotted him. He lived by hiding anyone on the run. Although most of the hoodlums in the district knew his joint, the Federal Agents hadn't got on to him as yet. He stood gaping at Bailey with watery eyes.

"What is it?" he said, looking at Miss Blandish. "You boys in trouble? It's Riley, ain't it? What are you doin' with her?"

Bailey tried to crowd inside the hut, but Johnny stood firm.

Bailey said: "Never mind who she is, Johnny. Let us inside. Come on, you dope. We gotta get under cover."

A sly look crossed Johnny's face. He stepped back. "We'll talk inside, huh?"

Riley forced Miss Blandish out of the car and pushed her into the shack. She broke away from him and ran over to Johnny.

"You must help me!" she said, gripping Johnny's arm. The smell of stale sweat and spirits that came from him nearly made her sick. "Don't you understand? They're kidnapping me. Don't let them do it. . . ."

Riley stepped across and dragged her away. "Shut up," he said to her.

Johnny looked at them uneasily. "I don't want to meddle with no snatch racket," he said. "You'd better get outta here."

Bailey jerked out his gun. "Listen, Johnny. You're playing with us an' you're liking it."

Miss Blandish ran over to Johnny again. "Take me home! I'll give you money! I'll give you anything. . . ."

Swearing softly, Riley pulled her round to face him. "Didn't I tell you to shut up?" he said, and smacked her heavily across her face.

The blow sent her back on her heels. "You beast!" she said.

"Cut that stuff," Riley said—"that won't get you places. You ain't Miss Moneybags no more. Get that into your dome before I take another sock at you."

She stood looking at him. One side of her white face flamed from the blow he had given her. Her great eyes travelled over his shabby suit and cracked shoes. He found himself squirming under her contempt.

Johnny said: "What *is* this? You boys can't bust in here without wising me up. Who is she?"

Riley said: "She's worth a hundred grand, Johnny. You stand to pick up twenty of 'em. All you have to do is to feed us and keep your ear to the ground. We take the risks and you collect the dough . . . how about it?"

Miss Blandish broke in: "Don't listen to him. I'll give you more money . . . if you take me away from him. . . ."

"Where can I put her?" Riley snarled. "Come on, you dope, I've had enough of this stuff."

Johnny hesitated, then jerked his head to the stairs. "She can go up there."

Miss Blandish backed away. "No!" she screamed. "I won't! Don't come near me—leave me alone!"

Riley shot a quick look at Bailey. Together they closed in on her. She began to scream, then as their hands touched her she relaxed. "No," she said, "don't touch me. I won't do anything. I'll do what you say."

Riley sneered at her. "That's a better line. Get up those stairs before I drag you up."

Drawing away from him, she ran up the stairs, stumbling on the rotten boards. Riley followed her up. On the overhanging balcony she drew back. The others below stared up at her. Bailey came to the foot of the stairs. Johnny moved casually to a gun-rack by the door. There were two shot-guns in the rack.

Riley kicked open a door on the landing. "Get in," he said, jerking his thumb towards the room.

She went into the small, dark enclosure. Riley followed her. He lit an oil-lamp hanging from the ceiling and glanced round. There was a bed with a mattress that looked dirty, but no bedding. A jug of water, with a thin film of dust floating on top, stood on the floor. A tin basin rested on a wretched bamboo table. Thick sacking was nailed across the window. There was a musty, stale smell in the room.

"Ain't like home, is it?" he sneered.

Miss Blandish watched a large squat spider crawling across the wall. Its bloated shadow made it obscene. Riley let his eyes drift from her to the spider.

"That scare you?" he said. "Like me to put it in your hair?" He reached out and picked the spider off the wall. The short hairy legs of the insect waved wildly. Miss Blandish caught back a sob.

"You play ball with me an' you'll be okay," Riley said,

watching her closely. "Start being smart with me and you'll get all the trouble you can handle." He pinched the spider steadily as he spoke. Suddenly it squashed in his fingers.

Miss Blandish covered her face with her hands.

"I'll treat you the same way," Riley said. He wiped his fingers on her silk wrap. One of the spider's legs still moved. Miss Blandish dropped the wrap off her shoulders with a stifled scream.

Riley grinned at her. "Losin' some of your starch. You'll get the way I want in a little while." He went out, closing the door behind him.

Old Sam and Bailey were sitting on the rough chairs waiting for him. He came down the stairs, yawning. "Hell," he said, "I'm tired." Then he stiffened.

Johnny was standing very still. He held a shot-gun waist high, covering them. Riley's hand moved to his gun, but the look in Johnny's eye stopped him.

"I shouldn't," Johnny said; "this gun'll blow your chest to bits."

"What's the idea, Johnny?" Riley asked.

"I just don't feel easy about all this—that's all. You sit down. I wantta talk to you."

Riley sat down near Bailey. They exchanged glances.

"Can't you put that gun down, Johnny? It don't seem friendly, coming from you."

"Maybe it ain't friendly—so what?" Johnny nodded his head at Bailey. "That guy's got blood in his eyes. I know the signs—he's done his first killin'."

Bailey started up. "Not so loud, you fool!" he snarled, terrified. "You got me wrong—I didn't kill no one. Do you hear? I didn't kill no one."

"Shut up!" Riley said. He looked across at Johnny. "You're right. The crazy punk knocked off her boy-friend. He's landed me in this jam. If it wasn't for him, I'd be in the clear. Listen, Johnny; you gotta play with us. I'm givin' it to you straight, ain't I? You gotta help us!"

"You rat!" Bailey said, trying to control his jitters. "I didn't mean to do it. He asked for it, didn't he? I didn't want to

hurt the guy—but he *had* to act brave.” He suddenly buried his face in his hands. “I never killed a guy before. There was blood on his face . . . on my boots . . . Frankie, they’ll burn me for this——”

“Aw, stop yappin’.” Riley banged the table with his fist. “You give me a pain.”

Johnny lowered his gun. “Take it easy,” he said. “I didn’t think you boys’d ever become killers. Well, okay, I guess I’ve gotta help you. But I wantta know the whole set-up. Who is she?”

“The Blandish girl. Does that mean anythin’ to you? I fixed this as a stick-up and now I gotta snatch on my hands. I had to take the girl—she’d seen everythin’.”

Johnny ran his fingers through his grimy hair. “That wouldn’t be John Blandish’s daughter . . . the rich fella . . . would it?”

Riley nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “Listen, Johnny, if we play this right we stand to pick up an awful lotta dough.”

Johnny seemed a little stunned. He wandered over to a cupboard and brought out a large earthenware jar. “Have a drink. I guess you boys wantta drink bad.”

“What about some grub, Johnny?” Old Sam asked feverishly. He had been sitting, chewing tobacco, listening and worrying.

“Sure,” Johnny said. “You’ll find a pot on the stove. Help yourselves.”

Old Sam began preparing a meal. “I don’t like this snatch racket,” he said. “It ain’t natural to take a dame like her and push her around. I don’t like it, Riley.”

“Then you know what you can do,” Riley returned. “I ain’t getting fried for no one.”

“Don’t fight among yourselves,” Johnny said, pouring apple-jack into tin mugs. “What do you reckon you’ll do, Riley? You’re no longer small stuff now—you’re way out in front. What the cops call Public Enemy Number One. If you want help, you’ll have to split evens.”

“Sure,” Bailey put in, drinking the apple-jack thirstily. “You’ll get an even split, if Grisson doesn’t get it first.”

Johnny froze. "What's that?" he said. "Grisson ain't in this, is he?"

"Like hell!" Riley put in. "This crazy rat's talkin' wild——"

"No, I ain't!" Bailey sat up. His face was flushed by the raw spirit. "I know what I'm sayin'. Listen, Johnny, we're in a jam. We ran into Schultz on the main road. He saw the dame. You know what he'll do—he'll tip Ma Grisson."

"If Grisson's tied up with this, I'm through," Johnny said, edging towards his gun. "He's as mean as a rattlesnake."

Riley's .38 jumped into his hand. "Hold it, Johnny," he said. "I've had enough of this. You're doin' what I tell you. I ain't scared of Slim Grisson or his old she-wolf of a mother. They ain't goin' to bother us."

Johnny wandered away from his gun. "Slim's bad," he said. "I know all you guys. I know when there's any good in you. Well, I guess there ain't any good in Slim Grisson. He's mean and bad right through."

Riley spat into the stove. "Aw, he's soft in the head."

"Yeah, he's soft like you say. But he's a killer. He'll kill anyone—anything—and he kills with a knife. I don't like guys who use a knife."

"Shut up, will you? You're giving me the heebies," Bailey snarled. "Let's eat, for Gawd's sake. I'm starving."

Old Sam had put some food on a plate. "I'll take it up to the dame," he said, a little sheepishly. "She oughta eat."

Riley watched him go. "The old punk's gettin' soft," he said to Bailey.

"You don't have to push her around, do you?" Bailey asked, his mouth full.

Riley grinned evilly. "She'll get pushed around plenty if she tries to high-hat me."

Old Sam pushed open the upstairs door and shoved the food at Miss Blandish. "Here, eat this," he said awkwardly.

She was standing in the middle of the room. Two tears welled up and ran down her face. She shook her head.

"Come on," Old Sam said gruffly, "get this inside you. You'll be fine then."

She hesitated, looking at the lined, shifty old face, then she took the plate from him.

He glanced at the dirty mattress and wrinkled his nose. "Not what you've been used to, I bet," he said. "I'll get you a rug from the car."

She said timidly: "Won't you help me? You seem kind. Tell my father where I am . . . telephone him. I'll give you——"

He shook his head. "Nope," he said, "can't do it. I'm too old for a scrap. You gotta stay here."

He went out, pulling the door behind him.

"You tucked her in?" Riley sneered as he came down the stairs.

Old Sam sat down at the table and began to wolf the rough food. "That's a mighty mean room to put a dame in," he said. "Maybe we oughtta clean it up a bit."

"Hell!" Riley shoved back his chair. "You guys make me sick."

Bailey and Johnny watched him thoughtfully. "What's wrong?" Bailey asked.

"Here's a chance of breaking into the big-shot class and you all act like you was pixies." He went across to the telephone and called a number.

"Who are you after?" Bailey asked.

"I thought maybe a word with Anna might give me a clean taste in my mouth. You guys do things to my bile."

Bailey shrugged and walked to the window.

When the line connected, Riley heard Anna's peevish voice.

"Hyah, baby. This is Frankie."

"Where've you been? Listen, Frankie—if you think you can walk out on me without saying a word, you've got to get your brains examined. Where were you last night? Do you think I like sleeping alone?"

Riley grinned. It was good to hear Anna again.

"Skip it, sweetheart," he said. "Listen—I've pulled a job. Yeah, the biggest job that's ever been pulled. Money? Don't make me laugh. I'll give you so much dough you'll make Ruckerfella look like a pauper. I can't tell you over the

telephone, but it's the tops. Now, listen. I'm at Johnny's place—the other side of Lone Tree Junction——”

“Riley!” Bailey's voice nearly rocketed to a scream. He stood glaring out of the window. “They're comin'. Two cars—it's the Grisson mob—they're comin' fast.”

The telephone receiver slipped out of Riley's hands. Dragging his gun from its holster he ran over to the window.

Bailey shook him. “Now do you see what you've done?” he quavered. “Why didn't you knock that floozie off like I told you——”

Riley smacked him across his face. “Shut up!” he snarled. He spun round to where Johnny was standing. “Get upstairs and see she don't squawk. We gotta bluff this out. You two guys stay here. I'll go up with Johnny. Keep your nuts. We'll bluff 'em.”

He pushed Johnny upstairs and they burst into Miss Blandish's room. She was lying face down on the bed. She struggled up when they came in.

“Listen, sister,” Riley said. “There's a guy comin' who's bad medicine for a dame like you. He'd tread on your neck and not know he'd done it. If you wantta save your hide, you'll shut your mouth and keep it shut. I'm goin' to try and stall him. If you don't want a bad time, you'd better start saying your prayers.”

It wasn't his words that made her cringe away, it was the white circle of fear round his mouth and the lurking terror in his eyes.

Riley stood on the balcony and looked down on the group of men who, in turn, looked up at him. Eddie was there, both his hands sunk in his raincoat, his black slouch hat pushed to the back of his head. Flynn was standing on the extreme left of the group, his hands also hidden, his eyes cold and watchful. Woppy and Doc Williams stood by the door. Their thumbs were hooked in their belts; both of them were smoking.

But it was Slim Grisson who kept Riley's eyes busy. Slim

sat on the edge of the table. He studied the shiny caps of his pointed shoes. He was tall, reedy and pasty-faced. His loose, half-open mouth, his vacant, glassy eyes, made him look dopey, as if he were without blood or gumption. But Slim was the coldest thing on two legs. A cold, inhuman spirit hid behind the idiot's mask and the sparse flesh of the thin body.

Slim Grisson was a killer. He had killed things when he was a child. Not for any reason, but to kill was in his blood. He began early to want money. He had always been lazy at school, refusing to take the least interest in books. The old master who had taught him was nervous of him. He had enough insight to know that Slim was bad. It did not come as a surprise when he caught Slim cutting up a new-born kitten with a pair of rusty scissors. It was not until later that he began to develop homicidal tendencies. By then, his mental equipment had greatly deteriorated. Sometimes he would be normal, even to a point of being quick-witted. Then he'd have a bad spell when he was almost an idiot.

Ma Grisson watched him closely. She could see that he was drifting. Sometimes he would startle her by an astute action, but, generally, he was completely unreliable.

He got a job in a pool-room, cleaning glasses. Here he mixed with a bootleg mob. He watched them handle wads of dollar notes. Although they treated him with contempt, he hung on until they accepted him as one of themselves. They gave him all the dirty jobs to do. He made mistakes, so they got rid of him.

Ma Grisson was determined that her son should be a gang leader. She let him go to prison. She let him knock around pool-rooms, bars and racecourses, hoping that he'd build up a reputation for himself. Gradually he learnt not to make mistakes, but only when Ma took his education in hand herself. Before he did a job, she coached him. She went over every detail again and again. It was like teaching a monkey to do tricks. Once he got the idea, he didn't forget. Slowly he climbed into the saddle by the simple method of killing anyone who opposed him, until the gang finally settled down and accepted him as their leader. But it was Ma who was the power

behind his throne. Without her, he was helpless. He did the dangerous jobs, while she sat at home, pulling the strings that worked his puppet mind.

The Grisson mob was the most vicious murder machine in the State. Ma had built it up and she was proud of it.

Riley hung his hands on his coat lapels. He could see that Flynn was jittery and he wasn't giving him the chance to turn on the heat. He stood trying to grin.

"Hyah, Frankie," Eddie called. "Didn't expect to see us, did you?"

Riley began to pick his way down the rickety stairs. His eyes never left the group waiting for him. Down he came, each step measured and slow.

"'Lo, boys," he said, trying to keep his voice casual. "This is a surprise."

He stood near Bailey, but they didn't look at each other. Eddie did the talking. Slim sat in a heap; his head on his chest.

"Where's the swell twitchet you were carryin'?" Eddie asked.

"Why, Eddie, you didn't come all this way to see her again? Say, you ain't thinking of making a date with her, are you? That'd be too bad. You see, we ditched her." Riley's fixed smile hurt his mouth.

Eddie tossed his cigarette butt on the floor and trod on it. "Well, well, so you ditched her. I wanted another look at that frill. Who was she, Riley?"

"Oh, just a broad," Riley said, keeping his eyes on Eddie's chin. "What's bitin' you? Ain't you seen a broad before?"

All of them were cold and immovable before his forced ease. Eddie said, "You didn't happen to pick her up at the Golden Slipper Club, did you?"

Riley didn't give himself away, but his belly suddenly felt cold and empty. "Why, you're crazy! The Golden Slipper? Say, that cheap little chiseller don't go places like that. We found her at Izzy's hash-house. She was stewed, so we took her along. We thought maybe we'd have a little fun with her. When she came to the surface, was she sore? We just couldn't

do a thing right with that baby, so we let her walk home. I bet that cooled her."

Eddie grinned. He was enjoying himself. "So, she was a cheap little chiseller, huh? And you let her walk home 'cos she wouldn't play ball? You oughtta write for the movies, Frankie—that's a great story."

Riley shifted uneasily. "What is this, Eddie?" he said. "It don't seem right for a mob your size to bother with us. Can't you find a dame by yourself?"

Slim dragged his eyes from his shoes. He looked at Riley who began to sweat. Slim had a mean look.

"Where's Johnny?" he asked. His voice was husky.

Riley leaned against the wall. "He's upstairs," he said in a jerky gasp.

"Get him," Slim said to Eddie.

The door above opened and Johnny came out. He leaned over the rail. The men below watched him. Johnny didn't make enemies, but he didn't take sides. He had kept healthy and he was staying healthy. He looked at Riley and then at Slim.

Riley implored his silence with a long, meaning stare, but Johnny wasn't looking any more.

Slim rubbed the side of his nose with his thumb. "Hello, Johnny," he said.

"'Lo, Slim," Johnny said. He kept his hands on the hand-rail, well in sight.

"We ain't seen each other for a long time, have we, Johnny?" Slim smiled. His hands were on the move the whole time. They moved up and down his thighs. They fingered his collar. They straightened his coat. They were restless, bony, frightening hands. "I've gotta new knife, Johnny."

Johnny shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "That's fine," he said, looking at Eddie uneasily.

Slim made a movement. It was too fast for Johnny to follow, but a knife suddenly appeared in Slim's hand. It was a thin-bladed knife, about six inches in length, with a black handle. "Look at it, Johnny," Slim said, turning the knife in his hands.

Johnny's face stiffened. "I can see it. You're a lucky guy to have a knife like that."

Slim nodded his head. "I know," he said. "Look how it shines." The light from the sun, coming through the dirty window, reflected from the knife on to the ceiling. It made a white, dancing patch overhead. "And it's sharp, Johnny."

Doc Williams, an elderly man with white hair, chewing a dead cigar, suddenly came to life. He had been standing beside Woppy like a waxwork from the moment he had entered the shack. "Take it easy, Slim," he said softly.

"Shut up!" Slim snarled at him. His eyes crawled up to where Johnny was standing. "Come down here, Johnny."

Johnny didn't move. "What do you want?"

Slim dug the knife into the table. "Come here!" His husky voice sounded gritty.

Doc signalled to Eddie, who said: "Leave him alone, Slim. He's a good guy."

Slim turned slowly and his eyes encountered Riley. "But he ain't such a good guy, is he?"

Riley's knees sagged a trifle. The sweat glistened on his face.

"Aw, pipe down," Eddie said roughly. "Put that sticker away. I want to talk to Johnny."

Slim hesitated, then the knife disappeared. He sat looking at Eddie out of the corners of his eyes.

"Look, Johnny," Eddie said. "We're interested in Riley's girl-friend. Have you seen her?"

Johnny's thin face was like a mask. "I wouldn't know if she was his girl-friend," he said; "but she's in there."

Nobody moved. Riley drew a sudden, short breath and Bailey turned green.

"Let's see her, Johnny," Eddie said.

Johnny turned and opened the door. He put his head round and said something, then he stood back. Miss Blandish came out on to the balcony. The men below stared up at her. When she saw them, she started back, and shrank against the wall.

Doc, Woppy, Eddie and Flynn suddenly had guns in their hands.

"Get their rods," Slim said, picking his nose.

Doc eased his way over to Bailey and jerked his gun from the shoulder-holster. Bailey just stood there, licking his lips. Flynn collected Riley's gun. Then as Doc turned to Old Sam the atmosphere went to pieces.

Old Sam went for his gun. He was surprisingly quick. The heavy gun began to boom before Doc's brain could flash a warning. Woppy had seen the move and fired at the same time. Doc flung himself backwards, but Old Sam had the top of his head blown off. He fell on his face, the gun flying out of his hand.

Riley and Bailey became livid. They stopped breathing for seconds.

Slim looked at them, and then at Old Sam. He had a starved, wolfish look on his face. Johnny came out and glanced down, then he pushed Miss Blandish, sobbing hysterically, back into the bedroom.

"Get him outa here," Slim said.

Doc and Woppy grabbed hold of Old Sam and dragged him out of the shack. They came back quickly. Eddie suddenly walked up to Riley.

"Listen, mug," he said. "You're in a jam. Come on; spill it. Who's the dame?"

"I tell you, I don't know." Riley jerked, his whole body shivering.

"Then I'll tell you," Eddie said, taking Riley's coat front in his fist and shaking him gently to and fro. "That's the Blandish girl, ain't it? You snatched her to get the necklace. We're wise to you, sucker. You got that necklace on you right now. Sure, that's the way it goes." He moved his hand inside Riley's coat and fished out the diamond necklace.

There was a long pause while everyone stared at the necklace. Then Eddie shook his head at Riley. He released him. "I guess this's curtains for you, pal," he said almost gently. Then he turned and flipped the necklace to Slim.

Slim held the necklace up to the light. He was entranced. "Look, Doc," he said excitedly, "ain't they pretty? Watch 'em glitter. They're like stars against a black sky."

Doc moved forward. "I've never seen anything like that in my life," he said, peering over Slim's shoulder. "They're worth a pile of money."

Slim's eyes went to the upstairs bedroom. "Bring her down here, Eddie," he said. "I want to talk to her."

Eddie looked at Doc, who lifted his shoulders. "Hows about these guys, Slim? We ain't got all night."

Slim went on stroking the necklace. "Get her, Eddie," he said.

Eddie went upstairs. Johnny didn't meet his eyes as he went past him into the bedroom. Miss Blandish was standing by the sack-covered window. She was trembling violently. When Eddie came in her hands flew to her mouth.

"Okay, okay, you don't have to be scared of me," Eddie said. He thought she was something to look at. "Slim wants you. Now, listen—that guy's mean. Do what he tells you and maybe you'll be okay. Don't get him wild. He's screwy, do you get it? Now, come on."

Miss Blandish didn't move. Her eyes were dark with terror. "Please," she said, "don't make me go down there. Please . . . I can't bear any more." She began to cry.

Eddie took hold of her arm. "Come on," he said; "he'll only get mad, then you'll have a really bad time."

He brought her downstairs.

Slim watched her as she came. "She looks like she's come out of a picture-book, doesn't she?" he whispered to Doc. "Look at her pretty hair."

Doc's face was worried. He had never seen Slim in this kind of mood before. Usually he hated women. "Be kind to her, Slim," he muttered uneasily.

Eddie stood Miss Blandish in front of Slim. He stepped back, watching. Everyone watched.

Slim smiled at her. "I'm Grisson," he said. "You can call me Slim." He rubbed the side of his nose with his thumb. "These yours?"—he held up the necklace.

Miss Blandish nodded. There was something so repulsive and terrifying about this creature before her that she had a mad urge to scream and keep on screaming.

"I thought they were." Slim fingered the stones gently. "They're pretty, like you. They must look very nice on that neck."

She flinched away.

"It's all right," Slim went on, "I'm not goin' to hurt you. Here, you can have them back. Put them on. I want to see 'em on you."

Eddie made a move forward. "Say, those rocks belong to all of us. Where do you get this stuff, Slim?"

Slim giggled. "Do you want 'em so bad, Eddie?" he said, without taking his eyes off Miss Blandish. "Then come an' get 'em." He screwed up his face into a comic grimace. "He won't take 'em," he said to Miss Blandish. "He's scared of me—they're all scared of me." He held out the necklace. "Here, put it on. Go on—let me see 'em on you."

Slowly, as if hypnotized, she took the necklace from him. The touch of the cold stones seemed to jolt her. With a gasping scream, she dropped the necklace and ran blindly to Johnny. "Get me out of here!" she screamed. "I can't bear any more of it! Get—me—out—of—here!"

Slim slid off the table. She had scared him badly. His knife jumped into his hand. From a weak idiot he suddenly changed into a killer. Half-crouching, he faced the others.

"What are you waitin' for?" he snarled. "Take 'em out—do you hear? Get 'em out! I don't want 'em hangin' around me. Get 'em out—get 'em out'!"

Woppy and Flynn closed in on Riley and Bailey. They shoved them out into the open.

Slim turned on Doc. "Get rope and tie 'em to a tree."

Doc, trembling, picked up several lengths of rope that lay amongst a pile of rubbish in the corner. He followed Woppy and Flynn.

Slim said to Eddie: "Watch her. Don't let her go away." As he moved, his foot kicked the necklace. He looked down at it, then picked it up. He shoved it in his pocket.

His yellow eyes were gleaming. He had never killed a man slowly, and he began to tremble with excitement. Miss Blandish was forgotten. The urge to kill had taken possession of him.

He could hear Riley yammering with hysteria. He could see his livid, glistening face, and the way his mouth worked in terror. That pleased him.

Bailey walked without saying a word. His face was pale, but dangerous lights smouldered in his eyes. They reached a small clearing in the thicket and, all realizing at the same time that this was the place of execution, stopped. Slim pointed to two convenient trees.

"Tie 'em there," he said.

While Flynn covered Bailey, Woppy fastened Riley to the tree with the cord the Doc had tossed to him. Riley made no effort to save himself. He just stood shuddering and jerking, helpless in his terror. Woppy turned on Bailey. "Get up against that tree," he said savagely.

Bailey walked deliberately to the tree and leaned his back against it. As Woppy came up to him, he kicked like a snake striking. His shoe sank into Woppy's belly and then Bailey was behind the tree, the slim trunk between him and Flynn's gun.

Slim became violently excited. "Don't shoot!" he screamed out. "I want him alive."

Woppy writhed on the grass, trying to get his breath, but no one worried about him. Doc stepped behind some bushes. His face was white and he looked a little sick. He was going to keep out of it.

Flynn slowly began to edge towards the tree, while Slim stood motionless, the thin-bladed knife in his hand.

Bailey looked round for a way to escape. Behind him the shrub was thick; in front of him Flynn approached cautiously; on his left Slim stood with the knife. It was to his right that he must make his bid for freedom. He made a sudden dive, but Flynn was closer than he realized. He aimed a blow at Flynn, who was expecting it and ducked low. Bailey's fist went over Flynn's head and he floundered. Flynn closed with him.

For a minute they strained. Then Bailey, who was the more powerful, broke away. He smacked Flynn on the jaw with a crushing right-hand punch. Flynn went over with a thud.

Bailey sprang away.

Slim hadn't moved. He stood there, his thin body drooping, his loose mouth half-open and the long knife hanging limply in his fingers. Woppy was still out. Bailey suddenly altered his ideas. There was only Slim. Doc didn't count. If he could knock Slim out, then Riley and he could surprise Eddie. It was worth the risk. He moved towards Slim, who waited with yellow, gleaming eyes.

Bailey suddenly saw him grin. That grin told him plenty. The idiot mask had slipped, and the killer was there. Bailey knew that he was dying fast. He tried to stop his legs advancing, but he couldn't control them. He got nearer to Slim and he felt his nerve going. The sweat was running into his eyes. When he was a few yards from Slim, he stopped. He had never felt so frightened; he knew that he was one rapid heart-beat away from his end.

Something flashed in the air, something shiny that caught the sun as it sped at him. He took Slim's knife in his throat.

Slim stood over him while he died. He didn't let Bailey die in peace, but kept kicking him in his ribs, gently at first, then with excited frenzy. He felt the same ecstasy run through him which a killing always gave him. He felt a little weak, standing in the hot sun, and the effort of kicking Bailey became too much for him.

Woppy had risen on his elbow, his face ashen. He began to curse softly. Flynn, still on his back, moved uneasily, a livid bruise on his jaw. Doc hid his face in his hands. He was not callous like the others.

Slim looked over at Riley, who shut his eyes. A horrible croaking sound came from his throat. Slim withdrew the knife from the thin wound. He cleaned the knife carefully by driving it into the grass. He did this four times before the knife gleamed again. Then he got to his feet and approached Riley, who suddenly realized what was coming to him. He began to babble feverishly.

Slim came quite close. He smiled at him.

"Don't kill me, mister!" Riley shouted, his eyes protruding. "Gimme a break, for Pete's sake!"

Slim still smiled. This was good. He liked them to turn yellow. He put his hand on Riley's shirt and jerked it out of Riley's trousers. With a powerful wrench, he tore the shirt-tail away. Riley stood there yammering.

"You're gettin' it there, Frankie," Slim said, pricking the shuddering flesh with his knife. "Right in the guts, pal, an' you'll take a mighty long time to croak."

"You wouldn't do that to me, Slim," Riley gasped—"you can't do it! I'm a right guy—don't I keep tellin' you? I wouldn't do anythin' to you, Slim. You ain't goin' to cut me like that? No! . . . Slim! . . . No! . . . Help! Help! . . . Slim! Don't do it, Slim! . . ."

Slim, still smiling, put his weight on the knife. The knife went in slowly as if it were going into butter.

Riley drew his lips back. His mouth opened. There was a long hissof expelled breath as he stood cringing against the tree.

Slim stepped back, leaving the black hilt of the knife growing out of Riley like a horrible malformation.

Riley began uttering low, quivering cries. His knees were buckling, but the cord held him.

Slim sat on the grass a few feet away. He pushed his hat over his eyes and squinted at Riley.

"Take your time, pal," he said, and then he giggled.

II

THEY pushed Miss Blandish into the hard light of the unshaded lamp. Her hands were fastened behind her back with Flynn's muffler. Two pads of dirty cotton-wool were strapped across her eyes with adhesive tape. Eddie had to hold her upright by putting his hand under her armpit. His hand felt warm and hard. She was glad of its comfort in her darkness.

Slim had gone upstairs. He was tired, relaxed and bored after the killing. He didn't even bother to see Ma. Even Miss Blandish didn't interest him any more.

Ma Grisson, from her chair, soaked Miss Blandish into her

brain. Ma was big, fat and lumpy. The flesh hung in two loose sacks on each side of her mouth. Her nose hooked sharply, and her little eyes were bright and unblinking. They were bad eyes, hard and shiny, like bits of glass. Her big, floppy chest sparkled with cheap jewellery. She was wearing a cream lace dress which made her look like a stack of unwashed curtains. Her huge arms, mottled with veins, crawled through the network of the lace like dough bound in wire netting. She sat in a heap, her hands grasping her knees.

Eddie loosed the muffler and whipped the tape off Miss Blandish's face. The tape tore the fine hairs of her skin and hurt. It was a shock to find Ma Grisson sitting there like an old vulture. Miss Blandish started back, treading on Eddie's toes. He pushed her forward. "Take it easy," he said; then: "Ma, meet Miss Blandish. Baby, this is Ma Grisson."

The old woman looked right into Miss Blandish. Those bits of glass tore deep, and Miss Blandish would have folded up but for Eddie's hand.

Ma Grisson hated talking as much as she hated talkers. She said one word when most people said ten, but this time she spread herself.

"So you're Blandish's kid," she said. Her big, shapeless mouth sneered. "I ain't got time for your type. You may as well know where you stand, then you won't be disappointed. Girls like you are only good for one thing, and you know what that is. You're goin' to stay here until your father buys you back. I don't know why he should do so, but he will. He's a sucker like all your playboys. If you're lucky, you won't be here long. It all depends on your father. If he tries to be smart, I'm going to take you apart and see what makes you tick. It won't be hard to find that out. Most of it I can see now. A pretty face and a built-up figure. Before I take you apart, I'll throw you to the boys. What they'll do to you is nobody's business. You're goin' to behave, and you ain't causin' no trouble. Do you understand?" She climbed out of her chair and stood over Miss Blandish. She was tall like Slim, but with shoulders like a gorilla. "Grab hold of her tight," she said to Eddie.

Eddie slipped behind Miss Blandish, gripping her arms hard. Ma Grisson slapped her across the face with heavy, sharp slaps that jerked her head from side to side. Eddie held her so she could not move. Her head jerked like a pendulum. "Don't get ideas and always do what I tell you." Ma said each word slowly and slapped at the same time. "Okay, now I guess you know what you're up against. Take her upstairs."

Eddie shifted his grip and hauled Miss Blandish out of the room. A red curtain hung over her brain and the nerves in her face revolted with pain. She felt herself being pulled upstairs, and she offered no resistance. She was blind with shock. Her world had caved in, leaving her terrified and broken.

Eddie came down again and found them waiting for him. Doc and Flynn were leaning against the steel shutters that lined the windows. Woppy had gone down town.

"You sure pushed her around," Eddie said, taking a chair.

Ma eyed them under the heavy-hooded lids. "I'm goin' to talk to you guys," she said. "I've told you before, you've gotta leave dames alone. They bring trouble. None of you are goin' to get ideas about that judy upstairs. She may be this an' that, but you're to leave her alone. This job ain't goin' to be easy. Too much time's already been wasted. I bet Blandish has contacted the Feds by now. We gotta work fast . . . we've gotta get the dough and then beat it."

Eddie poured out a shot of bourbon and folded up on the couch. He took a long pull and then balanced the glass on his chest, while he gave himself a cigarette.

"What's the set-up, Ma?" he said.

"You get into town and 'phone Blandish. Tell him to lay off. Tell him he'll have instructions tomorrow how to pay the ransom. Tell him that we'll get tough if he tries anything—when I say tough, I mean tough. Tell him what will happen to the girl and make it raw."

Eddie groaned and drained his glass. "Okay," he said, getting up with an effort. "I'll give him the works." He hesitated before the bottle, but Ma told him to get going, so he jerked his hat farther over his eyes and left the room. They

heard the car door slam and the tyres scream on the loose gravel.

Ma looked at Flynn. "Now use your head," she said. "Who knows we're in this?"

Flynn brooded. "There's Johnny," he said at last, "he saw everything, but Johnny's okay. We left him planting those three stiffs an' taking care of their car. We gotta do somethin' for Johnny, Ma." He looked at her questioningly.

She nodded. "I'll take care of that. Johnny's still useful. Who else?"

"There was the guy who served them with gas. He saw Eddie 'phone to you. He might've seen the dame. I guess that's all."

"We can't take chances," Ma said. "Take care of the garage fella. We'll be sure then. We've got to spread the rumour that Riley kidnapped the girl, so the cops can track up on him. When they find he's missing, they'll think he did it for sure. The Feds'll put the heat on him, and we'll be in the clear. So long as they don't find their bodies, we're safe. But the garage hand might give 'em a lead. He's gotta go, Flynn."

"It'll be a push-over," Flynn said. He took himself off.

Ma turned her head and looked at Doc thoughtfully. "You ain't said much, have you?" she said. "What's on your mind?"

Ma's relations with Doc Williams were on a different level from those with the other members of the mob. She respected Doc.

At one time he had a good practice, but drink killed it. For a long time he struggled against it, but in the end it killed something in him. He got into trouble. A trembling hand wasn't much use in an operation. The medical authorities had no mercy for him. He was out. But Ma gave him a hand. She was smart enough to see how useful a medical man would be to her mob. She wouldn't have the worry of finding medical help if one of her boys got shot up. Doc could look after their health, their finger-prints and their wounds. He was worth his pay-roll.

She did not expect him to take part in the active side of the

mob. He was the only one who dare criticize her or offer advice. She didn't take the advice, but she liked having him around. He was someone to talk to when she got lonely, which wasn't very often. Ma was a hard individual.

Doc came over and sat down. He fumbled inside his black coat and took out a thin cigar. "I don't like this, Ma," he said. "I know it'll mean a lot of money, but I'm sorry for the girl. She's too nice to be treated like this."

Ma grinned. "You're a soft old fool," she said. "She's had everything up to now, hasn't she? Then let her suffer a little. It'll do her good."

Doc hid behind a cloud of oily smoke. "I know," he said. "We all have to suffer sometimes in our lives, but this is the end for her, isn't it? You'll never send her back, of course?"

Ma shook her head. "You're smart," she said admiringly. "No, she ain't goin' back. When we get the dough, it'll be the river for her."

"Slim behaved very oddly with her," Doc said after a moment's pause; "very oddly."

Ma looked at him sharply. "What do you mean?"

"Just that. Slim doesn't like women, does he? He's scared they'll laugh at him; but this girl seemed to do things to him. He treated her like a child treats a beautiful toy."

"Aw, you're screwy, Doc," Ma said impatiently. "Slim hasn't time for women. That's the one thing he doesn't worry me with. That boy has been a load of grief to me, but women don't come into it."

"Until now," Doc said, shutting his eyes. "I think your last worry's on the way."

"You've never tried to kid me, Doc," Ma said, her cold eyes hovering on his face. "You ain't kiddin' now, are you?"

Doc shook his head. "See 'em together," he said. "Ask him for the necklace. He's got it, you know. Had you forgotten that?"

"There's time for that. I wanted to get the urgent jobs done. He'll give it to me when I ask him. Now, look, Doc—get some notepaper and write to Blandish. Tell him to get five

hundred grand in used Federal Reserve currency in one- five- and twenty-dollar bills. He's to put this money in a light-coloured leather bag and keep it handy. When he's done that, tell him to run an ad. in the *Tribune* for the sale of white lead paint in small kegs. That'll be the signal for us to contact him to pick up the dough. Warn him how tough it'll be for the girl if he tries a double-cross. Will you do that?"

Doc nodded. "All right, Ma," he said, and went into the next room to write.

Ma Grisson sat still for several minutes, thinking. If Slim was going to make a nuisance of himself with this girl, the sooner they got rid of her the better. But Ma couldn't believe it. Slim had never shown any signs of manhood. Some time during his life his development had been arrested. She got up slowly. Well, the sooner she knew, the better, she thought. She walked upstairs to Slim's room.

He was lying on his back, playing with the necklace. As she came in the necklace disappeared with the same incredible rapidity with which he produced his knife.

She had seen the necklace, but she didn't tell him so.

"What's the matter?" she said, coming in and sitting on the bed. "You tired or something."

Slim looked at her suspiciously. "Yeah," he said, "I'm tired. I didn't want to hear all that talk downstairs. I don't like so much talk."

"Well, it's all fixed," Ma went on. "We ought to make a pile of jack out of the girl."

Slim's face lit up. "Where is she, Ma?"

Ma felt her heart lurch. So it was true. She'd never seen such a simple, pleased look on her son's face before. "She's safe enough," she said shortly.

"She's pretty, ain't she, Ma? I've never seen anyone like her. Did you see her hair?"

"She'll mean nothing to you, Slim," Ma said harshly. "What's come over you? She's just another dame, and dames are poison."

Slim sniggered. "This one ain't, Ma," he said. "I'm goin' to keep her. I like her."

"Well, we'll talk about that later. I want to see the necklace, Slim."

He brought it out and held it away from her. "It'll look swell round her throat," he said. "I'm givin' it back to her."

Ma felt an overpowering rage creeping through her veins. "What are you talkin' about?" she snarled. "Those diamonds come to me. You gone nuts?"

Slim's face stiffened. He swung his long, thin legs off the bed. "I'm givin' 'em to her," he said fiercely. "You ain't havin' 'em. No one's havin' 'em but her."

Ma leaned forward and slapped him across his mouth. His head snapped back and she slapped him again. "Your trap's too wide, Slim," she said softly. "Give 'em here."

Slim was shivering a little. His hand fluttered to his hip, hesitated, then fell to his side. His slack mouth hung open and the nerves in his face twitched.

"I wantta give 'em to her," he whined, holding his cheek.

Ma reached forward and snatched them from him. "I'm boss here," she said coldly. "You'll do as I tell you. Maybe you can play around with her for a while. I'll see her about it. She might not like you, Slim, then what would you do? She might laugh at you—you wouldn't like that, would you?"

"Make her like me, Ma," he implored. "I wouldn't want to hurt her. Will you talk to her? Will you make her be kind to me? You can have the necklace if you do that."

Ma drew in a deep breath. "Go to sleep," she said. "I'll fix her to like you, Slim. She'll do just what you tell her. She'll be your plaything, Slim."

He looked at her, his face bright again. "Yeah," he said. "I never had a plaything, did I, Ma? I never had nothing when I was a kid."

Ma moved to the door. "I'll have everything fixed by tomorrow," she promised, and went downstairs slowly.

Doc was standing in the hall. They looked at each other. "You were right," she said slowly. "What am I goin' to do?"

"That's up to you," Doc said quietly. "What are you thinking of doing?"

Ma turned away. "I'll have a little talk with her and see.

She might do him some good. You don't know until you try, do you, Doc?"

Doc stood watching her for several minutes, then he went slowly upstairs to his room.

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As soon as Eddie got into town he parked the Airflow and bought a newspaper. The headlines had it all. The kidnapping of Miss Blandish was news and it was plastered all over the front page. Photographs of Miss Blandish and MacGowan stared back at him as he read the large type. It was all wind, anyway, because there was no lead and the police had made no statement.

He walked over to a small cigar store at the corner of the street. He nodded to the fat man behind the counter and passed through a doorway into the pool-room.

The room was thick with smoke and full of men smoking, drinking and playing snooker. Eddie looked round quickly and spotted Woppy by himself at the far end of the room. He walked over and sat down. Woppy had been sent into town for news.

Eddie helped himself to the rye Woppy pushed over to him. "Anythin' movin'?" he asked.

"Plenty," Woppy returned, screwing up his eye as the smoke of his cigarette curled upwards. "The heat's on all right, but the bulls are looking for Riley and his mob. That little rat Heinie has blown the works. The cops know that Bailey was interested in the rocks and they can't find him, so the rest is easy. The Feds'll be in town almost any time now an' they're goin' to have a clean-up. Watch out they don't catch you with a rod."

Eddie grinned. "I'm contactin' Blandish and then I'm blowing. This spot's goin' to be mighty unhealthy and we're better outta the way."

Woppy finished his rye regretfully. Sitting still and drinking appealed to him. "Okay," he said. "I'll wait for you here."

Eddie walked into the street and looked round for a telephone booth. As he stood hesitating, he saw a woman on the

opposite pavement. He glanced at her casually. She had a bold face, without being vicious. Her blonde hair looked like thinly beaten gold and her figure had it all in the right places. He liked her a lot and he wished he was not on business. He turned regretfully on his heel.

He found the booth in a drug store and searched through the directory until he found the number he wanted.

Hanging his handkerchief over the mouthpiece to muffle his voice, he dialled. A deep voice came over the line almost immediately, as if Blandish had been expecting him.

"That Blandish?" Eddie asked, making his voice sound tough. "Get a load of this: we've got your daughter an' we're sending you instructions. This is a snatch, brother. You play ball with us and it'll be okay. Call the cops off. That's your first job. Follow the instructions you'll get an' don't try to be smart. Don't forget that there are lots of things that can happen to a girl besides twistin' her neck. Your daughter is okay now, so keep her that way. The smell of a double-cross an' she ain't goin' to be okay . . . there are plenty of the boys who want to give that dame a tumble, an' that's what she'll get if you start anythin' that ain't in the book." He slammed down the receiver before Blandish could say a word. He walked out of the box with a grin.

He noticed that the woman had crossed the road and was looking in a shop window quite close to him. He walked past her and their eyes met in the reflection of the window. He gave his hat a snappy tweek, but kept walking. At the cigar store he paused, and she walked past him. A white card fell from her hand and fluttered near his feet. He grinned and watched her walk down the block. He picked up the card. On it was scribbled *243 Palace Hotel, West*. He grinned again. She fooled him all right. She didn't look that kind. He shrugged and put the card in his vest pocket. She was certainly worth a visit when business got slack.

He picked up Woppy and they walked over to the Airflow. Suddenly Woppy nudged him and jerked his head. Eddie looked over and saw a long, powerful car coming to a standstill not far from them. There were two men sitting in the car,

powerful, hard-looking men. The car was dusty, and had travelled far and fast.

"The Feds," Woppy said, speaking low.

Eddie climbed into the Airflow and Woppy got in under the wheel. They took tremendous care to seem casual. Their rods burnt in their holsters. The Federal Officers had seen them, but after a long look they showed no interest. The Airflow gathered speed and slid out of town.

Woppy heaved with relief. "That was too close," he said. "This burg's goin' to be lousy with dicks from now on."

"Take it easy," Eddie said, wiping the cold sweat from his face. "Blandish will call 'em off. I gave him the works all right, and he's in no state to get tough."

Ma Grisson's place was not conspicuously hidden away. It stood in a small plot of shrubs and trees, but there were some other houses around. Ma Grisson had taken her time in finding this place. The front door of the house was completely hidden from the road. No curious eyes could see who left or who got out of the cars that drifted to the house at all hours of the night.

Having selected a respectable neighbourhood, she had some Italian workmen in who knew how to keep their mouths shut, and they turned the house into a steel fort. When she was satisfied that it was bullet-proof and bomb-proof she moved in with the gang. Ma Grisson had lived long enough to know that she would have enemies, and she could feel reasonably safe entrenched behind her steel walls.

The Airflow ran up to the front door and Eddie climbed out, while Woppy went round to the garage at the back. Flynn drove up a moment later in a Dodge.

Ma Grisson was waiting. "You first," she said to Flynn.

"Easy," Flynn said. "He was on his own. He came up to give me gas an' I let him have it smack in the face. The slug took the top of his head off. I stopped long enough to dig the slug outta the door, an' then beat it."

Ma Grisson rubbed her hands and told Flynn to go to bed. Eddie gave himself a drink and sat down near her.

"Blandish is scared to hell," he said. "I told him to turn

off the heat . . . but when he gets the girl back things'll start all right. The Feds have pulled in . . . I saw 'em arrive."

"He ain't gettin' her back," Ma Grisson said.

Eddie thought for a moment. "You rubbin' her out?"

"She's seen too much," Ma told him.

Eddie looked at her sharply. "She's a swell dame . . . seems a waste." He swung the knob and the radio began to hum.

"What do you care?" Ma Grisson asked, her eyes shrewd.

"I should sweat," Eddie said, setting the dial to ten.

The radio hummed into words: "*Calling all cars . . . attention all cars. . . Blandish kidnapping. . . Persons wanted are: Frank Riley. Description; five-foot ten . . . a hundred and forty pounds . . . about thirty-seven . . . black hair . . . sallow complexion . . . wearing dark brown suit and soft hat. John Bailey also wanted in connection with the Blandish kidnapping. Description; six foot . . . a hundred and sixty pounds . . . thirty-four . . . sandy complexion. . . Wearing dark blue suit and black hat. Also Sam Macton. Five-foot seven . . . sixty . . . a hundred and fifty pounds . . . grey hair and moustache. . . These people are hiding near town . . . Don't take any chances. . . they are dangerous . . . that's all. Maddistone.*"

Eddie and Ma looked at each other. "That's the sweetest break we've had," Ma said. "While the Feds chase that lead we are sitting pretty."

Eddie got up and poured out another drink. He came to the couch and lay down. "Where's Slim?" he asked.

"He's in bed," Ma said. "I'm worried about him, Eddie. He's getting ideas about the girl."

Eddie sneered. "He wouldn't know what to do with her. Why, that guy's like a kid of ten. You ain't got nothin' to worry about." He stretched himself and yawned. "Am I tired?" he went on. "I'm goin' to snatch some sleep." He took out his silver-plated watch and glanced at it. The white card fluttered to the ground. Ma glanced at it. Eddie grinned and picked it up.

"This was slipped to me by one of those professional dames," he said to Ma. "Nice little dish. Tailed me for quite——" He broke off, staring at the card. "For the love of

Mike . . ." he began. He turned the card over in his hand. The address was on one side and on the other was written: *What have you done with Riley?*

As a street clock was striking two the Airflow slid to a standstill near the Palace Hotel. Flynn eased himself wearily in his seat and looked at Eddie.

"Here we are," he said. "Now what?"

Eddie opened the door and got out. "I'm goin' in. You wait out here an' get ready to beat it if anything begins to pop. Slim'll come in with me. This set-up stinks, but we've gotta know what it's all about."

Slim followed him. They walked quickly down the dim street to the hotel. There was a light burning over the porter's desk. Eddie went in and looked round. The porter was dozing over the final night edition. He blinked sleepily at the two men when they leant over the counter.

"Listen, pal," Eddie said, keeping his voice low. "We are lookin' for information. Who's got room 243?"

The porter woke himself up and his stupid face frowned.

"Can't give you information like that, sir," he said sharply. "Will you kindly call round in the morning and ask at the office?"

"Wise guy, eh?" Slim sneered. He pushed his gun across the desk. "Open up! Who's in 243?"

The porter's face went like dirty dough at the sight of the gun. With fumbling hands he thumbed the register. Eddie snatched it from him. He ran his finger quickly down the list of numbers.

"Anna Borg," he said. "Who the hell's she?"

He noted that the rooms on each side of 243 were empty. Slim slid the gun in his hand until he held it by the barrel. He reached forward like a snake striking and hit the porter between the eyes. It was a hell of a belt. The porter spread himself behind the counter. Eddie craned his head to look at him.

"You shouldn't have hit him that hard," he said. "Maybe he's got a wife an' family."

Slim was looking mean. "Let's get upstairs and see this dame."

The lift was standing deserted and they took it up to the third floor. The corridor was dimly lit and they found the two-hundreds on the floor above.

"Stay right here," Eddie said. "Don't start anythin' unless you hear trouble."

Slim backed into the shadows where he could see down the passage and the head of the stairs. Eddie started to gumshoe past the doors, looking for 243. He guessed that the room he wanted was at the far end, and he was right. He listened outside the door for several minutes but heard nothing. He eased the handle in his hand, and when he felt the catch slip he pushed gently. The room was in darkness. He stepped in and shut the door. He took a small flash from his pocket and swung the light slowly round. The room was empty all right. He snapped on the electric light.

With his gun ready he moved forward, slowly searching for likely places where anyone could hide. He found nothing and he relaxed. The room was untidy, as if the occupant had dressed hurriedly. A heap of clothes lay on the bed. A white silk thing was on the floor, as if someone had just stepped out of it and left it there. The dressing-table was crowded with cosmetic bottles, and a large powder-bowl had tipped a little of its contents on the carpet. Eddie opened some drawers and glanced inside, but found nothing to interest him. He turned to the open window and looked out. *The Airflow had disappeared!* He leant out, but the street was deserted.

Staring into the semi-gloom of the lights he swore softly. What the hell was Flynn playing at? Where had he gone? He turned off the light and slipped out of the room. Slim joined him from the shadows and Eddie gripped his arm. "Flynn's scrambled," he said. "There's no one in the room. I guess she's out on a date."

Slim cocked his head. They both listened. Faintly they heard someone talking downstairs. Slim crept to the head of

the staircase and looked down the well into the hall. For a moment he stood there, leaning over the barrier, then he whirled round. "The Feds," he whispered. "They've found the porter . . . that's why Flynn beat it. Come on . . . we gotta get outta here."

"Take it easy," Eddie said, keeping his voice low. "There's somethin' phoney goin' on here."

"What are you gabbin' about?" Slim demanded, his gun in his hand.

"Who's this Borg dame?" Eddie demanded. "What's Riley to her? How come when she dates me up the Feds move in?"

"Let's get goin' an' do the thinkin' later," Slim returned.

"I'm stayin' an' watchin'," Eddie said. He walked back, and Slim followed, grumbling.

"We'll park in the room next door, just in case the bulls are interested in 243."

They took up positions just inside the empty room, leaving the door ajar. They could see into the dim passage. They stood there waiting. Eddie could feel Slim's hot breath on his neck as he crowded behind him. Just as they were getting weary and were relaxing, a man walked softly down the passage. A big, powerful fellow, with wide shoulders and a hard bronze face. Eddie watched him walk out of his line of vision and heard him mount the stairs to the next floor. He did not move or make a sound. He knew that Slim and he were in a spot, and it wouldn't do to start popping guns. The man was an agent of the F.B.I. Eddie was sure of that. He knew it was a bad thing to start swopping shots with a G-man, and he wasn't looking for trouble. They waited several minutes, and then the man came back. Slim's breathing became hurried. He was getting steamed up.

The Federal Agent paused near their door and looked back over his shoulder. He seemed puzzled, as if trying to figure something out, then he walked downstairs again. They relaxed a little. Eddie was about to step into the passage when Slim pulled him back. *The door of the room opposite 243 was opening gently.* Eddie hurriedly pushed his door to, leaving enough space to watch. The opposite door opened and a woman put

her head out. He recognized her at once. It was the woman who had dropped the card at his feet. He drew his lips back in a grin. She hesitated, looking up and down the passage, then, moving with the quickness of a lizard, she darted across the passage into 243.

Eddie looked over his shoulder. "What do you make of that?" he asked.

"That's the broad who slipped you the card?"

Eddie nodded.

"What's she doin' over the way?" Slim asked.

"That's what I'm goin' to find out," Eddie said, stepping quietly into the passage.

"A sweet time to do that with a couple of dicks around."

"Listen, Slim," Eddie whispered. "I don't like it. This wants lookin' into."

Slim shrugged. He was getting jittery.

"I'm goin' into that room she just left, an' then, if I'm still in one piece, I'm goin' to have a word with her. Keep an eye on the bulls, will you?"

Slim nodded and Eddie stepped across the passage. He turned the knob slowly and entered the room. The lights were burning. He took the whole scene in with one glance. Then a little shock ran through him and he lowered his gun slowly. There was a dead man lying on the floor. There could be no mistake just how dead he was. The small blue hole in the centre of his forehead told Eddie that he was as dead as a lamb cutlet.

Ma Grisson had been staring at the wall for some time, and Doc Williams began to get uneasy. Whenever Ma got those brooding spells it meant that trouble was coming to someone. Doc was amusing himself with a tommy-gun. He fitted the round pan and inspected the bright-jacketed .45 automatic shells it contained; then, losing interest, he put the gun down on the floor and gave himself a cigarette. He kept his eyes off Ma because she did not like people taking an interest in her.

She sat so still that he finally got to his feet and walked out of the room. He opened the front door and stood looking out at the garden, dimly lit by the moonlight. He felt more at ease, and leant his thin frame against the door-post.

Ma hadn't noticed him go. She suddenly got out of the chair. She looked as if she had made up her mind. She lumbered over to the table and took from the drawer a length of rubber hose.

Doc heard her movements and turned his head. He could see her through the open doorway. He saw the rubber hose in her hand, and watched her climb the stairs surprisingly quickly for her bulk. He pushed his hat over his face and scratched the back of his head. She had got him guessing.

Ma Grisson walked into Miss Blandish's room. She turned on the light. Miss Blandish hurriedly sat up in bed. Ma held the rubber tubing in her hand and came over and sat down on the bed quite close to Miss Blandish. She held the tubing up so that Miss Blandish could see it.

"Ever been socked with a thing like this?" she asked in a hard voice. Miss Blandish shook her head dumbly. She had just come out of a troubled sleep, and this seemed a continuation of her nightmare.

"It hurts," the old woman said. She tapped Miss Blandish on her knee. Miss Blandish stiffened. The dull, sleepy look in her eyes changed quickly to sudden anger. She struggled up in bed, pushing the bedclothes away and clenching her small fists. "You dare touch me like that again . . ." she began.

Ma Grisson grinned. Her big yellow teeth made her look wolfish and strangely like her son. "Gettin' high hat . . . are you?" she said, and one of her huge hands gripped Miss Blandish round her wrists, pinning them together in her hot grasp. Miss Blandish wrenched and pulled, but she could not get her hands free.

Downstairs Woppy came through the garden and met Doc, still standing at the door. "Eddie back yet?" he asked.

Doc shook his head. He followed Woppy into the living-room. Woppy picked up a bottle and held it to the light. "Ain't there anythin' to drink in this hole?" he asked, putting

the bottle back. Doc went to the cupboard and got out a full bottle. He pulled the cork and poured two drinks.

"Where's Ma?" Woppy asked, giving himself a long pull from the glass.

Doc jerked his head. "She went upstairs," he said. "I don't know what she's doing . . . somehow, I think she's going to give that girl a bad time."

Woppy filled his glass again. "Why?" he said. "That frill's a smasher, ain't she? What's Ma gettin' tough about?"

Doc shook his head uneasily. "The old wolf's been sitting over there all the evenin' broodin', then she suddenly gets a length of rubber tubing and goes upstairs. Do you think she's goin' to beat her?"

Suddenly the two men looked at each other.

"What's that?" Woppy asked uncomfortably.

They stood there several minutes, then Doc turned on the radio. He blasted the swing music until it rolled round the room.

"She shouldn't make her scream like that," he said uneasily.

Upstairs Ma Grisson was sitting once more on the bed, breathing hard through her thick nose. She watched Miss Blandish with her little black eyes. The rubber tubing lay on the floor where she had dropped it. Miss Blandish sat upright, twisting the sheet in her hands. Tears ran down her face.

Ma Grisson said, "Now we can talk."

Miss Blandish said nothing, but she listened. Ma started speaking slowly, but she did not choose her words. Suddenly Miss Blandish said no; and then she kept on saying no. Ma Grisson still talked. Miss Blandish had recoiled to the head of the bed. She knelt up against the wall, her face hidden in her hands, saying no.

At last Ma lost patience. "You can't get outta it, you little fool," she snarled. "If you play ball you stay here, if you don't you get shoved in a sack with your throat cut, and it's the deep drink for you. I'm puttin' it to you plain. You know what I told you. What's the answer?"

Miss Blandish turned her face and looked at the old

woman. "I won't," she said. "Nothing you can do will ever make me. . . ."

Ma Grisson got to her feet. "A real tough baby," she said. "Now I'll tell you somethin'. You're goin' to do what I say an' like it before I'm through with you . . . get that? I gotta nice little pill downstairs that you're going to take, an' that's goin' to put you in a different frame of mind. You can think about that tonight . . . it'll give you sweet dreams. We gotta way with girls like you. A little dope an' away goes the toughness . . . you see."

She turned to the door and opened it. "You'll see me again," she said.

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Eddie took a deep breath and pushed his hat to the back of his head. He told himself that he had to work quickly. With a break like this and the dicks downstairs this was just one hell of a spot to be in. He stepped towards the dead man and knelt, keeping carefully away from the sodden carpet near the man's head. He recognized him all right. It was Heinie, the newshawk; the man who told the Feds about Bailey. Eddie asked himself if that was coincidence. Quickly he searched through the man's pockets, but found nothing of interest; just the usual oddments a man will carry. He opened the wallet and glanced inside, then he shoved everything back as quickly as he could.

He got to his feet and looked round the room. He could see at once that there had been no struggle. He reckoned that someone had knocked on the door, and when Heinie went he got the slug as he opened it. From the tiny hole, Eddie guessed that the gun was almost a toy. He thought maybe it was a woman who had done it. He lightly touched Heinie's hand. It was still warm. He must have been knocked off very recently. Certainly during the time Slim and he were on the floor. This was a sweet spot.

He looked into the passage. Slim was still watching by the head of the stairs. Eddie eased himself out of the room and shut the door. He carefully wiped the door-handle with his

handkerchief. It was a bit late in the day to take precautions, but habit dies hard. He walked across to 243 and tried the handle, but the door was locked. He tapped softly. Slim glanced over his shoulder at him, and then continued to stare down the well. Eddie tapped again. He put his head against the panel and whispered, "Open up!" The woman did not answer. "Come on, sister, open up or I'll kick the door in." Still she did not answer.

Suddenly the wailing of police-sirens floated up from the street below. Eddie whirled round. Slim waved him to the stairs. The woman in 243 started to scream, piercing screams that tore Eddie's nerves in shreds.

"That chippy'll sink us . . . let's get outta here."

They raced for the stairs and tore up to the next floor. They heard doors opening and people shouting, then a pounding of feet as the coppers crowded up.

"The roof," Eddie gasped. "Jeeze, why in hell did we leave the tommy behind?"

The uproar going on downstairs came to them faintly. They blundered down the passage in front of them. A door at the far end was suddenly flung open and a scared man poked his head out. Slim hit him as they crowded past and he went over with a grunt. A woman inside the room began to yell. There was a door at the end of the passage which led to the roof; it was locked. Slim did not hesitate; he blew the lock off with two shots from his gun. The noise of the explosions in the confined space made both men rock. Gasping for breath, they flung themselves on to the flat roof. The cool, dark night was a relief after the stifling closeness of the hotel.

Running to the edge of the roof, they both took a stiff drop on to the next building, some twenty feet below. The shadows were thick, and they scrambled hurriedly under cover. Over the parapet they had just left, two heads with flat caps suddenly appeared. Slim paused and, aiming carefully, fired twice. One of the heads disappeared quickly, while the other appeared to slump forward as if hit.

"We gotta separate," Eddie said. "If you get outta this meet me at the Cosmos."

Slim drew his lips off his teeth. "I'll get outta this okay," he said. "Takes more than a copper to stop me."

Eddie left Slim crouching behind a stack. Slim liked a tough spot, and Eddie told himself that he could get on with it. He looked down into the street. Crowds had collected and the street was blocked from end to end. Police-cars stood in a row in front of the hotel. The crowd was a sea of upturned faces. Keeping his gun steady, Eddie swung his legs over a close-by parapet and dropped on to another roof. He hid himself in the darkest shadows. He could just see some figures moving about cautiously on the hotel roof. He grinned to himself. Those bulls weren't taking chances. Suddenly he heard the roar of Slim's gun and saw one of the dicks fall. Slim was enjoying himself all right. The police fired steadily at the flash, and Eddie heard the slugs whine over his head. He hastily shifted his position.

There was no way of getting off the roof into the street. Everyone down there would be on the lookout. He would have to get into a building and wait until the heat cooled off, he told himself. Slim's gun crackled again; the sound was farther off. Eddie was pleased that he was drawing the bulls off. He never had much use for Slim, anyway. He moved carefully, keeping in the shadows.

Suddenly he ran into a cop. He came round the stack quickly, and he was on Eddie before either realized it. The cop acted quickly, but Eddie was a fraction before him. He jumped in and lammed at the powerful head with his fist. The cop, instead of going back, came forward and closed with Eddie. He was tough all right, and nearly had Eddie off his feet with the first rush. They reeled for a moment, then broke apart. Eddie didn't want to use his gun. He had kept out of sight up to now and didn't want to draw the bulls on to him.

Slim was still shooting some way off. The cop had a night stick and a gun, but he was so excited that he didn't shoot. He charged in again, and this time Eddie was ready for him. He hit him as he came in with all he had, and the cop went over with a crash. Eddie was on him and struck him between the

eyes with his gun-butt. He got to his feet and looked round cautiously.

All was quiet on his part of the roof, although Slim was still shooting on the hotel roof. He seemed to have made up his mind to put up a battle. Eddie noticed a skylight near by, and running forward he hastily jerked it open. The bolt holding it in place was flimsy, and it snapped after his first heave. He flashed his light down into the empty room, and then quickly slid his legs into the void and dropped. He reached up and refixed the skylight.

Opening the door, he let himself out of the room into a dark passage. Quickly he ran to the stairs, and with soft, hurried steps descended to the second floor. He looked over the banisters before going farther and was glad that he did. Three flat caps were coming up with a rush. He hadn't a moment. The sweat was streaming down his face now. He was in a jam all right.

He whipped round and noiselessly entered the first room near him. The light was burning, and for a moment he thought the room was empty; then he saw a woman leaning out of the window, intent on the excitement going on in the street below. He shut the door quietly and crossed the room with two strides. He jerked the woman round. She was so startled that she couldn't even scream. He rammed his gun into her chest, knocking the breath out of her body.

"Listen, sister," he said rapidly. "You've gotta play ball. One crack outta you an' you get it. The bulls are after me an' I ain't gotta minute."

He could see, now that he looked at her, that she was a young blonde, with blue eyes. She wore neat black pyjamas that suited her.

"Get into bed quick," he said.

Terrified, she obeyed, and huddled the clothes round her. He leant over her. "You gotta cover me," he said, speaking low and quick. "If the bulls look in, you gotta stall. One crack that's not on the level and I'll make a hole in you . . . get it?"

He reached out his hand and snapped off the light. Then he lay on the floor on the far side of the bed to the door. They lay

in the darkness listening to the pounding feet and the short, sharp exclamations as the police went from room to room, turning out the occupants.

Eddie raised himself cautiously so that he could just see the girl lying there. "Keep your pants on," he said; "you ain't got any need to be scared."

She turned her head and looked at him in the dimness. He could just make out the white blob of her face. She didn't say anything. He slid his hand inside the sheet and took her hand. "I'll just keep this until the bulls pass by," he said. "If you do get a fit of nerves, maybe you'll get a little strength from me." She lay as still as death, and he reckoned that she was badly scared.

Heavy footsteps sounded outside. A head came round the door and a bright beam hit the girl between the eyes. She gave a little squawk and raised her head. Eddie kept below the side of the bed, but he pressed her hand hard.

"Who . . . is . . . it?" she said.

"Okay, miss," the cop said, taking a good look and liking it a lot. "You ain't been disturbed, have you?"

"What is it?" she demanded. Eddie handed it to her. She was running her act through like a professional.

"We're lookin' for a couple of birds," he explained. "But if you ain't heard anythin' you get off to sleep again . . . sorry to have woken you."

Eddie sneered. All this oil and bull from a cop.

"Will you please go away?" She sounded cross.

"Sure, sure." The cop withdrew his head. Eddie relaxed a little, but stiffened as the cop looked round the door again. "Sweet dreams," he said coyly, and withdrew again, chuckling.

"Take it easy," Eddie said to the girl, "you're doing fine."

She said nothing, but Eddie found that she was gripping his hand. Eddie lay on the floor, listening. The sound of the crowd swelled outside in the street. He wondered if Slim had been picked up. He felt safe lying there in the darkness, and gave himself a bouquet.

"That was a nice job of work," he said in a low voice, and she squeezed his hand. He sat up slowly and then got to his

feet. The house was silent now. "Okay, sister," he said, grinning into the darkness. "Thanks for the buggy ride."

The blonde still kept his hand and she raised herself on her elbow. "You goin'?" she asked.

Eddie turned his head and looked at her. He could just make out her dim face close to him. He told himself that this dame was a honey all right.

"Yeah," he said regretfully; "I can't stay here all night."

"You've got to sleep somewhere," she said in a small voice. "Don't you like this place?"

Eddie was stupefied. "Why, for the love of Mike . . ." he said, and burst out laughing.

Two days later an advertisement offering some kegs of paint appeared in the *Tribune*. Ma Grisson flung the paper over to Doc.

"He's got the dough ready," she said. "Now we've gotta collect it."

Doc glanced at the ad. and smiled. Ma said: "It's goin' to be a cinch with the old man scared for his daughter. The Feds are standin' by, but they ain't goin' to start anythin' until he gets her back. Then the heat's goin' on good. Well, he ain't getting her back. We get the dough first an' fool 'em after. You write another note an' tell him how to pass the bag. Tell him to take a car out to the Maxwell filling-station. A mile from there he'll see a light. As soon as he sees that he's to sling the bag to the side of the road. He's to drive fast an' he ain't to stop an' he's to come alone. Tell him, too, that if he starts any smart stuff it'll be just too bad for the doll. When girls get kidnapped there's plenty that can happen to 'em without gettin' rubbed out . . . tell him that."

Ma looked over to Flynn, who was lounging in an arm-chair, half asleep.

"You go to the high road above Maxwell with a flash, an' when the old man comes along give him the signal. You ain't goin' to have trouble, but they may try an' trail you. The

road's straight for miles, an' there's no way they can come after you without you spottin' 'em. If they do get on your tail, drop the bag right in the middle of the road and shake 'em. When they see you've let the dough slide, they'll draw off, 'cos they'll know what that'll mean to the girl. It's a soft job, but don't mess it."

Flynn nodded his head. "Tomorrow night?" he asked.

"Yeah." Ma Grisson rubbed her huge hands. "An' it'll be a sweet night's work."

Flynn and Doc left her and went upstairs to Eddie's room. Eddie was lying in bed. He waved a hand when they blew in.

"The dough's ready," Flynn said, sitting on the bed. "I'm goin' after it tomorrow night."

Doc was walking about the small room restlessly. "Got a drink, Eddie?" he asked.

"Sure; you'll find one in the cupboard. . . . Pass it round."

Doc mixed three long drinks and passed them round. Flynn took a pull and then put his glass on the floor beside him. "Seen Slim?" he asked.

Doc smiled. "He's asleep. I don't think he's got over his little scare the other night."

Flynn looked at Eddie with a leer. "You're a lucky guy—you'd fall in a sewer and come out smellin' of lilac. Right in the middle of a gun battle, you pick yourself a honey and fight it out in bed."

Eddie shrugged his shoulders. "Can't keep 'em away," he said with a grin. "Listen, dope, I've only to snap my finger and a flock of dames just suffocate me. It's my personality."

Flynn winked. "I don't spell it that way," he said; "but you certainly had the laugh on Slim."

The three men grinned at one another.

"Mind you, Eddie," Flynn went on, "Slim gave those bulls the works. Three of 'em knocked off and four of 'em hurt bad. Slim didn't have a scratch, but they certainly scared the pants right off him."

Doc shook his head. "I don't think so. Slim's got no imagination. He doesn't scare easily. That boy's the coldest thing I know."

Flynn winked. "Not so cold," he said. "He's gettin' ideas about the dame upstairs all right. Every second he's free from Ma he spends hanging around the diz. Ma won't let me go near her. Why the hell should he?"

Eddie looked up sharply. "You know, I'd forgotten about that kid. Slim's hanging around her? What's goin' on? She'd gone clean outta my mind."

Doc looked uneasy. "You'd better not interfere," he said. "Slim's got a complex about her. You know, Eddie, I don't like it. Ma's got her under drugs."

Eddie tossed off the bedclothes angrily and slid out of bed. He grabbed his trousers and began to dress hurriedly. "What do you mean—drugs? Don't look so burnt up, you damned old hypocrite. If Ma's given her a drug, she got it from you—didn't she?"

Doc wiped his face nervously with his handkerchief. "You know I've got to do what Ma tells me," he said feebly. "The drug won't harm her. It just makes her quiet. . . ."

"I know. It takes the fight out of her. What's goin' on? Slim ain't . . .?"

"No, Eddie—he wouldn't do anything to her. He likes being with her, that's all. The drug——"

"Yeah? Well, I'm goin' along to look at this kid. If Slim's been foolin' around, I'm going to kick up a row. She's too good for him. If a guy's goin' to play around with her, I'm goin' to be that guy."

Doc and Flynn exchanged glances.

"Take it easy," Flynn said. "You know Ma told us to lay off."

"I don't give a damn what Ma says," Eddie returned, fixing his tie. "I'm goin' to have a peep at her and see what's poppin'. Stick around, will you?"

"Okay," Flynn said, shrugging. "I'll sit on top of the stairs an' tip you off if Ma comes. Doc can keep an eye on Slim."

Eddie grinned. "Nice work," he said. "I ain't going to be long."

He left his room, glanced downstairs to make sure Ma wasn't around, then mounted to the second floor with quick,

noiseless strides. He reached Miss Blandish's room. The door was bolted on the outside. He slid the bolt back and put his head round.

The bed was in line with him and he saw Miss Blandish sitting in bed with the covers drawn to her chin. Her knees were bunched up and she was sitting as far up against the head of the bed as she could. She looked small, screwed up like that. Her face was flushed and her eyes had an unnatural brilliance. When she saw him, her eyes opened and she caught her breath sharply.

"Take it easy, Tutz," he said. "I thought I'd look in just to say hello."

"Oh, please go," she said.

He didn't move. "It's all right," he went on, "I'm all for you. I want you to have the breaks. I ain't goin' to start anythin' . . . honest. Let me talk to you. I want to hear how things are working out for you."

"Can't you leave me alone?" she said wearily. "Will I ever get away from all this?"

"Here," he said impulsively, jerking out his flask, "have a drink."

She took the flask and he watched her tilt it. He watched her throat contract under the fiery bite of the liquor. Some of it trickled down the side of her chin. He leaned forward and pulled the flask away. "Say, that's hard liquor," he said—"you don't want to get stinko."

She passed her hand across her face as if she were wiping away cobwebs. Then she said: "I wanted that. I never thought I could want a drink so badly as I did then. Drink does something to you, doesn't it? I mean, it gives you courage." She turned in the bed to face him. "You were kind to me once. Can't you tell my father where I am? Haven't I paid enough? I haven't been really bad; selfish, thoughtless—but not really bad. Why is this happening to me?"

"That sort of talk'll get you nowhere," Eddie said, leaning against the wall. "What's been happening to you? Slim been messin' you around?"

She suddenly shuddered. "He frightens me. What is he? Is

he mad? He sits looking at me as if I were a goddess. It's horrible. He comes in at night and stands over me. I lie still, pretending to be asleep. Sometimes I pretend to be dead. It must be nice to be dead. I was frightened of dying once, but I don't mind now. He came in last night. The room was cold. It was dark. He stood quite close and he moaned to himself. Oh, he frightened me. I nearly screamed, but I didn't want him to know I was awake. I bit my lip—it's sore now—and he went away after a little while." She beat her knees with her clenched fists. "What does he want?" she cried. "Why doesn't he do something? It's this awful staring and sitting and doing nothing that's driving me mad."

Eddie lit a cigarette. He drew a deep breath. "Yeah," he said, "he's bad, that guy. You know, he's never shown any interest in women until you came along. But you're sure he hasn't touched you?"

"Do you ever dream?" she said. "Horrid dreams, and you wake up feeling frightened? You lie still wondering if you're still dreaming or if it's over and you're awake? I once had a dog who used to have bad dreams. I can see him now, lying in front of the fire. He used to twitch his legs and groan, but he'd wake up and be quite happy—he seemed to forget his dreams." She ran her tapering fingers through her hair. "But I can't forget my dreams. What are they doing to me? There's an old man who comes in and he pricks my arm with something. Are they drugging me? Is something happening to me that I don't know about? You must tell me—I shall go mad if you don't. There are faces that come in my dreams. Men being murdered. There's Jerry—— Oh, Jerry . . .!" She began to cry. "I dreamed that they killed Jerry——"

Eddie had had enough of this. He moved towards the door. "I'll fix things for you, sister," he said; "don't get upset." He went out and shut the door behind him. He didn't look back. There are some things that just don't stand looking at, and Miss Blandish was one of them.

He met Flynn at the head of the stairs. Doc joined them and they went into Eddie's room.

Eddie lit a cigarette. "You ought to be proud of yourself,"

he said to Doc—"you and Ma and that dirty little rat are driving that kid nuts." He threw the cigarette into the trash basket angrily. "I guess she'd be better off dead," he said.

"RILEY MOB BELIEVED RESPONSIBLE FOR
PALACE SLAYING

"Murdered Man now Identified

"JOHN BLANDISH PAYS RANSOM MONEY TODAY

"It has been learnt that the man who was brutally murdered in the Palace Hotel has been identified as Alvin Heinie, the free-lance society gossip writer. It was Heinie who tipped the police that the Riley gang had questioned him concerning the movements of John Blandish's daughter, the kidnapped heiress. It is understood that the ransom demand for 500,000 dollars is being paid today. John Blandish, fearing for his daughter's safety, has refused to allow the State Authorities to interfere, although the Department of Justice is ready to participate in what will be the greatest man-hunt of the century when it is known that the kidnapped girl is safe.

"The police have reason to believe that Alvin Heinie was murdered by the Riley gang. The two men, who escaped after a desperate gun battle on the roof of the hotel, have been identified by the porter at the hotel by police photographs. . . ."

Ma Grisson read the running story to the mob. They grinned round at each other when she put the paper down.

"That Riley louse did a sweet job of work when he started this," Flynn said. "Jeeze . . . he's gettin' everythin' pushed on to him."

Eddie was looking thoughtful. "Yeah, maybe it's okay for the moment, but have you asked yourself just who did knock Heinie off? It wasn't Riley . . . we know that; and it wasn't us. What worries me is where this Borg dame fits in. I bet my last nickel that she rubbed Heinie out . . . but why? She knows somethin' that connects us with Riley, an' I don't like it."

Ma watched him with her little black eyes. She nodded her head. "Eddie," she said, "you're right. This's something phoney that might trip us up. Before we collect that dough we gotta know somethin' about this Borg dame. Suppose you go into town an' see if you can get any dope on her."

"Okay, Ma. . . . Anyone comin'?" He looked questioningly at Slim, who shook his head.

"Best go in alone," Ma said, watching Slim, "an' be mighty careful how you handle it. The dicks're goin' to be on the look-out for anyone they don't like the look of after the trouble you had the other night. It was a lucky break that the porter got you muddled."

Eddie saw that Slim was biting his nails savagely. He was getting the jitters all right. Eddie thought that Miss Blandish had it coming. He caught Ma's eye and jerked his head. She got up and followed him outside.

"Can't you tell Slim to lay off that dame upstairs?" he asked.

Ma looked at him carefully. "Listen, Eddie—this ain't your concern . . . do you get that? You're a good boy an' you do as you're told . . . but keep outta this."

"Aw, come on, Ma." Eddie tried a grin. "A swell dame like that don't want a hoodlum messin' her about. Why don't you give the girl a break?"

Ma's eyes snapped suddenly with rage. Her great lips curled off her teeth. She looked like an old she-wolf.

"You be careful," she snarled at him. "Slim can have that dame if he wants her. You know Slim's been a good boy about women, an' if he fancies this one . . . well, he can have her."

Eddie sneered. He knew he was taking a risk, but he wanted to get to the bottom of this. "What you doin' to the girl . . . preparing the way for him?" he asked, speaking low and fast.

Ma struck him across the mouth with the back of her hand. It was a heavy blow and it bruised his lips. He reeled a little on his heels, but he managed to dig up a grin. "Okay, Ma," he said, moving off. "Forget it, will you?"

He left her standing quite still, her fleshy face dark with rage. He guessed there wouldn't be any comeback on this, but

he'd have to watch his step. He hesitated about taking the Airflow and decided to take the Dodge. The heat might be on the Airflow for all he knew, and he wasn't going to take chances.

The hands of the clock over the Cosmos Club were standing at twelve minutes past one as he drew up. He slid out of the car and walked into the club. The cleaners were still clearing up after the night before, and he had to pick his way through the buckets and step over the wet flags. The girls were rehearsing under the direction of a thin little man dressed in a white sweater and dirty flannel trousers. The pianist pounded away, a cigarette dangling from his lips. The girls smiled at Eddie; he was well known at the club and generally liked. He paused long enough to pinch a rouged cheek and pat a sleek behind before going on to the office.

Pete was sitting with his feet on his desk, brooding. He seemed surprised to see Eddie. Pete was fat and oily. His shifty eyes looked Eddie over before he offered a flabby hand.

"Hyah, Pete?" Eddie said, sitting on the corner of the desk. "What's cookin'?"

Pete began to bellyache. "Business's closed down," he said, giving himself a black cigar. Eddie helped himself from the box on the table. "This gunplay has got everyone jittery."

"Yeah!" Eddie grinned. "I read about it. This cluck Riley seems to be the big-shot around here these days."

Pete scowled. "There's somethin' phoney about this business," he said, chewing his cigar. "Riley ain't never pulled a big job like this. He musta gone nuts or somethin'. Now if it'd been Slim . . ."

Eddie's eyes narrowed a little. "Slim's been outta town for a week," he said evenly. "I been with him an' the other boys."

"Sure, sure." Pete gazed vacantly up at the ceiling. "You been outta town all right. Ain't seen you around for some time. Still, if I'd pulled this Blandish snatch I'd go mighty careful. The bulls are just waitin' for the ransom to be picked up an' the dame to be returned before they start a war. They even got aeroplanes standin' by."

"Well, that's Riley's funeral," Eddie said carelessly.

"Yeah, as you say . . . it's Riley's funeral."

"Ever run across a broad who calls herself Anna Borg?" Eddie was casual, he studied his cigar, but Pete flicked a sharp look at him.

"Sure I know Anna," he said. "What of it?"

"We want to know somethin' about this dame." Eddie leant forward. "Who is she?"

"Say, Anna's a swell baby——"

Eddie cut in roughly. "Skip that," he said. "I know what she looks like . . . I want to know who she is an' what she does."

Pete regarded him through the thick cloud of smoke that was escaping from his moist mouth. "You're interested, ain't you?" he said.

"Come on, Pete, spill it," Eddie said curtly; "this's important."

"Anna's a gun-girl," Pete said slowly.

"Who's she carry the gun for?"

Pete smiled. He leant forward so that his fat face was close to Eddie's. "She carries a gun for Riley."

Eddie stiffened. "Sweet suffering Pete!" he said.

"Yeah, I thought that would give you a knock." Pete's black eyes were snapping. "An' believe me, Eddie, a lot of folks are havin' the same shock. They're askin' why Anna isn't with Riley. That's what's knockin' 'em around here. Funny, ain't it? Riley puts the finger on the Blandish dame an' leaves Anna flat."

"Maybe she's watchin' the way it goes for him," Eddie suggested.

"Maybe hell!" Pete returned. "It ain't my business, but I reckon Anna has had a sore deal. But she ain't the dame to take it on the chin. She's goin' to cause plenty trouble before she's kicked through."

Eddie brooded. "Where's she stopping?" he asked at last. "Still at the Palace?"

Pete got out of his chair. He threw the cigar butt into the brass spittoon near the door. "What's all this?" he demanded sourly. "Why're you interested in Anna?"

"Ma wants to know."

Pete shaped his lips to a noiseless whistle. "Ma's in on this?" He looked startled. Ma had a name in his circle and it wasn't a pretty one. "Well . . . yeah, she's still at the Palace, with two dicks sittin' outside her door. The Press don't know she's in the hotel when this Heinie gets himself knocked off, but the bulls do."

"Why don't they pinch her?" Eddie demanded.

"Say, these G-men are wise. They reckon that Riley came to see Anna at the hotel an' ran into Heinie an' just had to give it to him for rattin'. Well, they figger it this way. If they keep on Anna's tail long enough they'll turn up Riley."

Eddie thought some more. "Listen, Pete. I gotta talk with this dame . . . you gotta help me. I don't want the Feds gettin' ideas about me, so you gotta arrange a meetin'. You ring her an' tell her to come right over here. I'll wait an' talk with her in this office an' the cops won't know a thing."

Pete began to protest but Eddie cut him short. "Ma wants this done, so you'd better do it." He took a roll of greenbacks from his pocket and slid them across the table. "Better let me pay for the 'phone-call," he added with a grin.

Pete hesitated a moment, then took the roll, glanced at it and pulled the telephone towards him. He dialled the Palace number. "I want Miss Borg," he said. Then: "That you, Anna? This is Pete of the Cosmos. Listen, baby. I want you to come right over . . . yeah . . . it's important. Can you come right away? Okay, I'll wait for you." He replaced the receiver on its cradle. "She'll be here in ten minutes."

"Swell." Eddie grinned. "They come easy for you, don't they, Pete?"

"Treat her gently," Pete said. "I've gotta soft spot for that dame, an' if it weren't for Ma asking I wouldn't do it."

"Take it easy. I ain't gettin' tough . . . not my way. . . . I just want to have a brotherly talk with her, an' that's all there is to it," Eddie returned. "Now, you take a walk . . . will you, an' leave me here? When you come back, the office is yours again."

Pete hesitated for a moment, then picked up his hat and left the room. Eddie took his gun and placed it on the desk. He

wasn't taking any chances with a girl who carried a gun for Riley. Gun-girls had to have plenty of nerve, but it wasn't wise to startle them. He relaxed in his chair and waited. The minutes slipped by and he kept his eye on the electric clock on the desk. He heard the sharp click of wooden-heeled shoes and he put his hand on his gun. The door swung open and Anna walked in. She was half-way across the room before she saw him. She had swung the door to as she entered. She stopped short, the colour leaving her face. He admired the steadiness of her crouch. She had a shock, but her brain wasn't frozen. He thought she was some locker. Riley knew how to pick 'em even if he had been a sucker. She had seen the gun and made no attempt to move.

"Hyak, baby?" Eddie said with a friendly grin. "Keep your pants on . . . I ain't startin' nothing just yet. Just put your bag on the desk, will ya? That's where you babies carry your nads . . . ain't it?"

She tossed the bag on to the desk and sat down. She was breathing quickly, but otherwise she was cool. Eddie took the bag, glanced inside and stooped it into a drawer. He shoved his gun back into its holster.

"You know who I am . . . don't ya?" he asked.

She said nothing.

"You left me your visitor-card the other day," he went on. "You asked where Riley was."

She relaxed a little, but her eyes remained watchful. He took out a packet of cigarettes and pushed them across the desk to her. She hesitated a moment, then took one. He got up, and moving round the desk he lit it for her. He sat on the corner of the desk quite close to her and grinned. "Now, listen: we gonna go together," he said. "You nearly had me in a spot the other night . . . but I don't feel sure about it. What the hell . . . I didn't knock off Heinie, but you did . . . an' you know it."

She stared back at him without a flicker.

"What should I care? They've pinned it on to your boyfriend, an' he's caddy nadden . . . so let's forget that. Okay. Now, you wanted to see me . . . I came along an' it was certainly

a warm welcome I had." He soft-pedalled her along the whole time. He could see that she was thawing out and getting over her scare.

"You an' I could get on well if you'd relax an' get a bit friendly."

"Where's Riley?" she asked abruptly. Her voice was husky, like those judys who moan over the air. Eddie sat back a little. He told himself that he was getting places.

"Now, why d'you think I know where Riley is?" he asked.

"You saw Riley the night he snatched that Blandish chippy," Anna told him, watching him with her hard eyes. Eddie told himself that she was a honey all right. He liked the way her lashes curled. There was nothing of the cheap moll in this set-up. She was not just paint and powder. You could scratch this dame and still find her good underneath.

"How did you know that?" he asked.

"All right, wise guy," she said. "I'll let you know facts and then you can talk. Riley 'phoned me at Johnny's. He said that he'd run into you and he thought Slim might try and pull a fast one. I've been and talked to Johnny, but he says that Riley and the girl stayed the night and then went on somewhere. He didn't know where."

Eddie handed Johnny a bouquet, but he didn't show how pleased he was. Things were going to pan out the right way after all.

"So what . . .?" he asked.

"Riley's vanished. I'm left for a sucker . . . that's what." Two bright spots of red marked her cheeks and her eyes flashed angrily. "I want to know where Riley is and I want to know why he hasn't sent for me."

Eddie scratched his head; he acted dumb. "I guess the dicks want to know where he is, too. He sure started plenty when he put the finger on that dame. Jeeze! I didn't think he had it in him."

Anna suddenly got to her feet. "Quit stalling!" she snapped. "What do you know?"

"Okay, sister, keep your bustle straight!" Eddie got up also. "I don't know much, but what I do know is tough to

tell. I know you usedta run with Riley, and from what I've heard you've been a swell pal to him. Well, baby, it certainly looks as if he's taken a runout powder on you."

Anna stepped up to him. She looked good when she was mad. "I'm on to you," she said shrilly. "You're tryin' to put on a phoney act, and I don't take a word of it. Riley was a right guy. We used to fight a bit, but then, who doesn't? He wouldn't have given me the run around, so that's out . . . do you get that?"

Eddie shrugged. "You know best, sister," he said indifferently. "I saw him with this Blandish dame, an' he was goin' for her in a big way. I'm tellin' you when I saw him she was lying back in the car with a great bruise on her puss, an' Riley was goin' over her good. Do you get that? He was givin' her the works. Now, let me tell you that this dame's a looker. If I had been in that car with her instead of Riley I'd done the same. Okay—I figger it this way. . . . Riley gets the ants. He has gone to ground with her. They wait for the ransom. What would he do with you around? Would you sit an' watch him jazz this dame . . . that's a laugh! Riley knew that . . . so you're out. What's more, you're out for good. He ain't likely to risk pickin' you up once the heat's on. I guess you're strung for a sucker——"

She slapped him across the mouth. It wasn't a hard blow and it made him grin. He liked them that way.

"Shut up!" she shrilled. "Riley ain't like that!"

Eddie shrugged again. He walked over to the window and looked into the night. He saw that he had said enough. She believed him all right and she was certainly getting burnt up. She began to pace to and fro. Eddie let her get steamed-up. He stood there looking into the street at the traffic, grinning to himself. Suddenly she came over to him and stood at his side. She seemed to go slack and weary. Eddie could almost feel the fire going out of her.

"I haven't heard from him for so long," she said bitterly. "If I find he's crossed me up . . .!" She began to beat on the wall with her clenched fist. "What am I going to do? I haven't a dime."

"Take it easy, sister," Eddie said, wondering if he could pat her somewhere, "dough ain't everythin'. Anyway, I could stake you for a bit until you get goin'."

She flashed round on him, spitting like a cat.

"I tell you this is a phoney!" she stormed. "You're lying!"

Eddie knew that he'd done a nice job of work. He was going to let it rest like that. He went over to the desk and took out her bag; turning his body so that she couldn't see, he shoved a roll of greenbacks under the .25. He went over to her and put the bag under her arm. He took her to the door. "Okay, baby," he said easily. "Forget it; maybe I'm lyin'. Wait for Riley, but don't wait too long. When you get tired of waitin', get Pete to send me word. I could do things for a swell looker like you, an' I ain't a sucker enough to give you the run around." He pushed her out of the room and shut the door. For a full minute he leaned against the panels giving himself a big hand. He'd see her again, he told himself.

Flynn checked his watch. He was sitting in the Airflow, a Thompson at his side and a powerful flashlight on his knees. He was jittery and cursed softly to himself. He guessed it would be smooth going because Ma had said so. He had great faith in Ma, but all the same he was uneasy. The Airflow was drawn up by the side of the road in the black shadow of a clump of trees. He had a clear sight of the road ahead of him for over a mile. He sat there waiting for John Blandish and the ransom. Doc had gone out and 'phoned Blandish a few hours back. He had again made it clear not to start anything. Blandish seemed resigned, but Flynn was not taking any chances. He wished Doc or Slim had taken on this job, although Ma had promised him an extra five hundred bucks. Five hundred bucks were nice if you weren't behind bars, but they were not much use if you were. He'd be glad to get this over. He looked at his watch again. It was getting on for the time. Overhead, dark clouds began to chase across the sky, blotting

out the moon which rode high. It was a hot night, but Flynn was sweating ice.

Suddenly in the distance he caught the gleam of headlights. Instantly he was out of the car and standing in the road. The Tommy was tucked under his arm. He ran towards the lights and then got off the road. The car was moving at a high speed, he could hear the roar of the engine; the driver had cut out the exhaust. Flynn began to flash his lamp. The beam cut into the darkness. The approaching car slowed down a little, and as it went past something was thrown from the window—it fell almost at Flynn's feet. He turned his lamp on to it and saw that it was a strong leather bag. The car hadn't stopped but just went on into the night. Blandish was obeying orders.

Flynn looked hurriedly up and down the road, but there was no sign of another car; snatching up the bag, he ran back to the Airflow. He ducked under the wheel and hurriedly shoved in the gear. He found himself shaking, but managed to dig up a grin. Ma had been right. It had worked without a hitch. Away shot the Airflow at high speed. Flynn drove like a bat out of hell. The road ran straight for miles, and every so often he glanced into the driving-mirror, but there was nothing following him. He took his time and kept to the road until he was sure that he was not followed, then, relaxing, he spun the wheel and got off the main road into the rough. He jolted and bumped for over a quarter of a mile before he felt certain that he had beaten the rap; then he headed for home.

The whole gang was sitting round waiting for him. He came into the room and dumped the bag on the table. He felt good, coming in like that, the centre of the stage, with the curious, greedy eyes of the others watching him. He grinned round at them.

"Not a squawk," he said.

Ma clambered to her feet and walked over to the table. She fumbled with the heavy straps. The others came over and stood watching. She jerked open the bag and began to pull out the neat stacks of money. She worked slowly and without excitement, but the others reacted each in his own way. She emptied the bag and pushed it off the table on to the floor.

Slim hung over the pile of money, his mouth hanging open and his eyes like slits in his white face. Five hundred thousand dollars looked nice right there in a heap on the table. Ma counted the bundles and checked the notes. Finally she looked up. "It worked," she said. "An' now the heat's goin' on the wrong party. Ain't that a sweet break?"

She looked at the money thoughtfully and then bent down to pick up the bag and put the money in it again. When she had finished she sat down, her great arms resting on the table. "This dough's hot," she said, tapping the bag. "It's goin' to get so hot in a few days that it'll be suicide to handle it. I want dough. I gotta plan that's goin' to land us all in the gravy for a long time. We got five hundred G's right here an' we can't use it. Okay, I'm sellin' this stuff for half price. I'm gettin' two hundred and fifty grand of real money. The stuff you can go out an' blow without a dick askin' questions. I'm tellin' you boys this, for you ain't figgered it this way. You guessed that we were sittin' pretty with a half a million bucks . . . but we ain't. This dough's poison. Every dick in the country is waitin' for it to come to the surface. . . . Right now we are in a sweet position. The Feds'll look for Riley, an' they ain't findin' him because he's planted snug. There's no line on us at all. We get the dough an' we can go ahead."

Eddie was watching Ma with hard eyes. "Who's goin' to take a risk on the dough an' give us half for it?" he demanded.

Woppy broke in excitedly. He had been listening to Ma with growing restlessness. "You ain't goin' to part with all that dough?" he quavered. "Jeeze! Half ain't so hot."

Doc and Flynn nodded their heads, but Slim said nothing. Money was not worrying him at the moment.

"Wait a minute." Ma looked round at the tense faces. Her little black eyes were glittering dangerously. "You don't want to part with two hundred and fifty grand, is that it? I bet you don't, but you're goin' to, an' you'll like it. Listen, you cheap flops. You ain't thought about this. You can't see the jam you're headin' for. I can. We're usin' safe money . . . get that? We're not gettin' gummed up for two hundred and fifty grand. I'm turning the dough over, and the gravy's round the corner.

I've fixed the deal with Schunbaum. He's on his way now. Schunbaum has plenty ways of handlin' hot dough . . . we ain't."

The others looked at each other. Eddie relaxed. "Okay, Ma," he said—"anything you say."

The others fell in with his lead. "Now we got the dough what you goin' to do with it?" Flynn asked.

"I'm startin' a pay-out right now," Ma said, showing her yellow teeth in a grin. "We split a hundred grand between us in equal shares for the trouble we've had, an' the balance is for a proposition I've been givin' my mind to for some time. I'm goin' into business, an' you boys are goin' to handle it for me. As soon as things have settled down we're goin' to move outta this joint an' goin' to some other town. I wantta start a club, complete with girls, booze an' clippin'. There's dough to be made in this game if you're smart. I'm sick of bein' a small-town hick with a mob of little gangsters around me . . . from now on, boys, we move into the big-shot class." She looked round at them to see how they liked the idea and she wasn't disappointed. "You've got to get wise to yourselves," she went on. "This idea of stickin' up banks and doin' small-time stuff is out now. I want you all to look on things from the big angle . . . it's your chance. As soon as Schunbaum brings the right dough you shall have it . . . an' it's up to you how you spend it."

Eddie eased himself in his chair and fixed his eye on the ceiling light. "How we sendin' the Blandish dame back?" he asked.

There was a heavy silence in the room. Ma looked at him, dark blood flooding her face. Eddie glued his eye to the light. Slim sat suddenly very still. The others looked uneasy, and the atmosphere was charged with dynamite.

"I thought I told you to lay off that angle?" Ma said, speaking slowly.

"You got the dough; the girl had better be turned loose."

Ma leaned forward. "Who says so?" she demanded.

Eddie hesitated, then he plunged on. "Say, what is this?" He turned his head and faced Ma. "You can't get away with

this. Listen, Ma, can't you see you're spoilin' the business? If we don't turn this judy loose there's goin' to be a row. Hell! What a row there'll be! No one'll pay ransom any more. The business will just fold up."

Ma lumbered to her feet. Her face was twisted with rage. "That dame knows too much. Riley gets the blame now an' we're free to run a new business. Let that dame outta here an' she blows the works. The Feds'll crack down on us. If you want your hide burnt . . . I don't! So button your mouth, yapper!"

Eddie shifted his eyes and said nothing. Slim got to his feet. His face was tense and his jaw muscles bulged.

"You lay off that broad," he said to Ma. His voice was loud and rough, but Ma only glanced at him.

"You pipe down, too," she said. "That dame's gettin' the works . . . so shut up, all of you!"

Slim groped inside his coat and jerked out his Luger. He kicked the table out of his way. It went over with a crash, the heavy bag going with it. There was a sudden stillness in the room. The blank stoniness of his face frightened them all. He walked up to Ma and shoved the gun in her face. "You lay off that broad," he repeated. "Do you get that? She's mine! You start any funny business with her from now on an' I'll give it to you. Do you get that, you old cow? I'll blow your guts out if you touch that broad."

Ma looked into the yellow eyes and saw that he meant it. She recoiled from him, scared. He followed her up and dug the gun hard into her floppy chest. She nodded her head at him quickly. "Sure," she gasped, "I got it."

He took the gun away from her and looked round at the others. They didn't meet his eyes. "You all keep your noses clean on this . . . or I'll start somethin'." He paused for a moment, then slouched out of the room. Ma watched him go. Her face had lost its colour and she was trembling with rage, but Slim had scared her badly. She knew that he'd kill her without hesitation, and suddenly, with all her pent-up, frustrated rage, she spat on the floor.

Slim began to walk upstairs. He still had his gun in his

hand. The smooth, cold butt felt good. Each step he took brought him nearer to Miss Blandish, and he curled his toes inside his shoes, trying to grip the stair-carpet through the leather soles. On he went, noiselessly, taking care to put his feet down softly and spring up on his arches. He suddenly became aware of how he walked upstairs. He became conscious of the weight each foot had to carry as he lifted himself from stair to stair. He slowed down as he reached the head of the stairs, but he kept on, measuring each step.

He stopped on the landing when he had climbed the stairs, and shoved the gun back into the holster. His hands gripped the stair-rail, squeezing the varnished wood hard, until the heat from him made the wood sticky. His head was turned to Miss Blandish's door and he stared at it, trying to see through the panels. He stood there, shaking and jerking, his eyes boring into the wood. He felt his feet sideling on, and he allowed his body to follow them. He moved forward slowly until he stood outside the door. He put his hand on the bolt, feeling the rough, painted metal cold to his touch.

He began to pull the bolt back, and he started to mutter and moan to himself. The bolt came out of the socket evenly and without a sound.

III

DAVE FENNER put his feet on his desk and tilted his chair back. His office was small and well enough furnished. The desk looked workmanlike with its chromium fittings and snowy blotter. The floor was covered by a fitted carpet and a book-case of law books stood by the window. The law books looked new. Fenner admitted to his friends that they were just a front for those who expected to see them. He hadn't opened a law book in his life.

Fenner was big. His massive shoulders bulged over the chair back, and his hard muscles made the wood creak. He wore his hat in the office from habit. It lay over his eyes and he seemed to be asleep.

The outer office was larger. A strong wooden barrier divided the room, shutting out unwelcome visitors. Paula Dolan sat before an idle typewriter and thumbed through the pages of a lurid magazine. She sighed now and then and continually looked at the wall-clock. She had a superb figure, a mass of corn-coloured curls, and her blue eyes were enormous. Fenner had engaged her on the spot because her looks alone should bring in some business, even though her brains were not her strong point.

The buzzer suddenly jerked her out of a day-dream. She slid off her seat and walked into the inner office.

"Hullo, baby," Fenner said. "You makin' out all right?"

Paula went round the big desk and sat down on his knee, but he pushed her off gently and took his feet off the desk. "Behave yourself, baby," he said; "we ain't at home now."

She made a face at him and sat on the corner of the desk. "I'm getting so tired of this, Dave," she said. "Nothing ever happens. We just sit around waiting for something to turn up and it never does. Gee! I might as well stay home."

Fenner stretched himself. "Aw, it ain't that bad," he yawned. "We started too quick . . . that's what. We started with a bang all right, didn't we? Well, this is the depression all over again. I guess there's no crime about these days."

"I wonder if you've done the right thing," Paula said, looking out of the window. "You were getting swell money on the *Tribune*, and this private sleuthing seems mighty uncertain."

"You thought it was okay when we started," Fenner said. "We made more dough in a week than it took me to pile up in a year as a press man. What's eatin' you? We got enough rent to last us another month . . . so what?"

"Okay; you're the boss." Paula dug up a smile. "But I'm getting mighty bored, sitting in front of that machine, twiddling my thumbs."

Fenner grinned. Well, you can always come in here . . . I'll amuse you, baby," he said. "Listen, if we don't see the breaks pretty soon, I'm going right out an' start somethin' all on my own."

"Can't I go home now?" Paula asked, putting on a big act. "There're lots of things a girl has to do that a great big man like you wouldn't know anything about."

"I bet." Fenner looked her over and told himself that she was a grand looker. He reached out a long arm and pulled her close to his chair. She didn't need any encouragement, and they remained in a huddle for several minutes until Fenner remembered that it was still office hours.

"Okay, Paula," he grinned, pushing her away. "You're too unsettling to have around this office; get goin' an' leave me to look after this joint for a bit. What about puttin' the nose-bag on with me tonight? I feel that a little spree wouldn't come hard."

"Yes," Paula said, "I'd like that. Will you pick me up?"

"Make it seven . . . that okay?"

She nodded and walked out of the room with a wave of her hand. Before she could shut the door Fenner shouted, "Ain't you got nothin' to read in this joint?"

She came back with her magazine. "I think you're a bit young for this," she said, standing in the doorway. "It's full of ideas that might get you thinking."

Fenner began to heave himself out of his chair with pardonable annoyance.

"You see," she went on hurriedly, "a nice girl like me has to be careful about giving you ideas . . . especially when I'm all alone. . . ." She dropped the magazine and hastily skipped out of the room. Fenner picked up the paper and grinned. She was a funny kid, he told himself. He settled down at his desk again and began to look at the pictures.

Suddenly the door opened again and Paula slid in. Her face was bright with excitement. "Hold on to your hat," she whispered in a stage voice. "The drama begins to unfold."

"You gone screwy?" Fenner growled, but before he could get to his feet she dropped a white card on the blotter in front of him. He picked it up and looked at it, then gave a low whistle. "For Pete's sake!" he said, gaping at her.

"He's out there waiting to see you."

Fenner got to his feet and dropped the magazine into the

wastepaper-basket. "Blandish?" he said. "John Blandish out there waitin' to see me? Gee! I've got a hunch right now, baby that Fenner and Co. are movin' into action once more, an' my hunch tells me that there are a few sawbucks hangin' to this, too. Look, Paula, send him in, an' stick around . . . I might need you."

Paula sighed. "Nosebags off . . . I suppose?" she said. "I was getting a thrill out of eating with you."

Fenner grinned. "On your way, sweetheart. If this is anythin' like my hunch, we shall be eatin' good very soon."

He sat down at his desk and folded his arms. Paula came back and stood holding the door.

"Mr. Blandish," she said.

John Blandish walked into the room with slow, measured steps, Paula closed the door behind him, leaving the two men facing each other. Fenner was surprised that Blandish was not a bigger man. He had had in his image of Blandish a tall, tough individual with a beefy face. Meat kings ought to be made like that, he thought. Blandish was quite the reverse. Just above middle height, a thin face, clean-shaven and heavy jaw. His eyes gave his face its extraordinary power and character. Deep-set, in dark sockets, they were hard, shrewd and vital. Fenner recognized the man who had made millions in those eyes. Blandish looked him over critically, from head to foot. He took his time, standing there, cold, impersonal and unfriendly. Fenner told himself that this wasn't going to be an easy interview. He waved Blandish to a chair.

"Sit down, Mr. Blandish," he said quietly. "I'm glad to know you. I guess you want to have a talk with me?"

Blandish sat down slowly like an old man. Apart from his hard eyes, he carried himself listlessly, as if he were utterly exhausted.

"So you're Fenner," he said abruptly.

Dave sat down again. "Yeah," he said.

"I've heard about you," Blandish went on. "You are supposed to be tough and smart."

Fenner shrugged. This sort of talk told him nothing.

"I've come to put a proposition before you," Blandish

said. "I just want a simple yes or no, because I'm in a hurry and I have got things to do."

"What's your proposition?" Fenner asked, fooling with a paper-knife.

Blandish selected a cigar from a pig-skin case. He cut the end carefully with a little gold penknife and lit it. He didn't offer his case to Fenner. He looked up sharply when the cigar was drawing, but Fenner was still fooling with the paper-knife as if he wasn't interested.

"Three months ago," Blandish said, and it cost him an effort to keep his voice steady, "my daughter was kidnapped. This isn't news to you, you have read about the business."

Fenner nodded his head.

"She's not been found, nor have the kidnappers been caught," Blandish said evenly. "I am going to offer you the job of cracking this business wide open. If you have any doubts, don't touch it; but if you think you stand a chance of succeeding, say so. To make it easier for you to decide let me explain how you'll stand. I shall be your boss. I am putting every dollar I have into this. Money is no object, but don't think that you are going to make a monkey out of me and feather your own nest, because I'm too old a bird to be caught like that." He paused and looked at Fenner, but Fenner said nothing, nor did he raise his eyes.

"The Federal Bureau of Investigation are still working on the case. They have a reputation second to none, and they will go on working until they crack it, but I can't sit idle while they follow their routine investigation. I'm getting into this myself, and maybe I'll beat them to it. I don't know, but I'm going to try. I have the facts of the case and I have their co-operation. I understand that you have knocked around a lot and have connections where they have not. You know a number of these hoodlums through your newspaper work. I have also heard that once you get going you are hard to stop. I believe that you're the man I'm looking for."

He paused again, but Fenner still said nothing.

"I will give you five thousand dollars as a retaining fee, and I will pay all expenses. If you don't succeed you won't be

getting anything more. On the other hand, if you pull it off, I will pay you five hundred thousand dollars."

Fenner looked up slowly, his face was expressionless. It was not for nothing that he had learnt to play poker with some of the sharpest card-players in the press room.

"That's a mighty big sum of money," he said.

Blandish nodded. "I am aware of that," he said dryly. "But I think you will have some difficulty in earning it. For the money I pay you as a retaining fee I want action. I don't want you to sit about this office thinking up ideas. I want you to get out and keep out."

Fenner got to his feet and walked over to the window. He looked down at the fast-moving traffic far below. His hunch hadn't let him down. Five hundred grand was nice going.

"I'll take it on," he said, turning abruptly. "I'll drop everything and start right away. I'd like to go over the case with you first. I will get my stenographer, as I want our talk on the records."

Blandish raised his hand. "Before you call her in," he said, "I want you to get this clear. From now on, I'm your boss. You are not to consider any other work. You are to report to me when you've got any information. If I think you are up the wrong street I'll tell you so, and you must start again. This is your one job and nothing is to interfere with it."

Fenner pushed his hat farther over his nose. He might have guessed that all that dough had a sting in its tail. He walked over to Blandish. "Forget it," he said roughly. "Be on your way and find a tame dick."

Blandish looked at him keenly. "You have just agreed to take on this job," he reminded him.

"Sure I agreed," Fenner snapped, "but not on those terms. You don't want a guy like me, you want a private dick with fallen arches who's anxious to make a livin'. When I get on to a case I handle it my way or not at all. I want to be free to hop a boat to China at a moment's notice and not to run to some big-shot an' say, 'May I?' I gave the *Tribune* the bum's rush because the editor thought he could boss me around. No, sir! I'm my own boss an' I ain't takin' orders from no one . . .

not even for five hundred grand. So forget it, an' thanks for the offer."

For the first time Blandish relaxed. "I heard you felt that way, but I wanted to see for myself. Very well, Fenner, let's get down to things. You handle this the way you want and I'll pay the bills."

Fenner grinned faintly, he couldn't help himself. He just hated seeing all that money trembling in the balance. He jabbed the buzzer and Paula entered with suspicious quickness. She sat near the desk with a note-book and pencil. She caught Fenner's warning eye and hastily adjusted her skirt.

"Now, Mr. Blandish, let's go over the case," Fenner said, giving himself a cigarette and sitting down. "If I remember, your daughter was abducted about the fourteenth of June."

Blandish nodded. "Yes," he said, "that's right. She was attending a party with a number of friends and she went on to a dance at a roadhouse with a young fellow who had been friendly with her for some time. She was wearing the diamonds. The police found MacGowan—that was the name of the man she was with—murdered in the early hours of the morning. My daughter had vanished, and as no trace of her has been found the police still think that she's alive. Apparently a man called Heinie reported to the police that a gang of hoodlums had shown interest in the diamonds on the morning of the crime.

"The police tell me that this gang used to operate in a small way as bank robbers in the smaller towns. They have been convicted several times on short sentences, but they've never touched any big jobs. The police are surprised that they should have taken on murder, kidnapping and highway robbery."

"Heinie was killed," Fenner said, "in the same hotel as Riley's girl-friend was staying."

Blandish looked at him sharply. "You seem to know a lot about this case," he said.

Fenner glanced over to Paula. "Let me have the Blandish file," he said.

She got to her feet and found the file in the fireproof cabinet. She put it on his desk in front of him. Fenner looked

over at Blandish and tapped the file with his finger. "It's my business to watch things. I don't know when I might use this sort of stuff." He opened the file and glanced through the mass of typewritten notes. "When the excitement first started I followed it carefully. I have here suggestions which struck me as bein' useful. Now, Riley was identified by the night porter of the Palace as the thug who killed Heinie. I guess Riley went along to have a word with this Anna Borg, ran into Heinie and killed him. Frankly, it stinks. I knew Riley, an' he hadn't the makin' of a real killer. Small stuff, yes, but killing . . . no, sir! I'm bettin' that when this case cracks we're goin' to get a surprise. What I want to know is why did Riley suddenly become a big-shot gangster . . . overnight, mind you?"

He turned some more sheets over and then looked up again. "On the morning after your daughter was snatched a gas salesman was rubbed out. That gas salesman had a dump about a hundred and forty miles from the Golden Slipper. Did the Feds think anything of that?"

Blandish shook his head. "I didn't hear anything about it," he said.

"Riley and his gang had to buy gasoline. Suppose they stopped at this place and your daughter screamed . . . obviously they had to iron out the salesman. The murder was without motive. Nothing was stolen. Maybe I'm wrong, but there might be somethin' in it."

He got up and took a large-scale map from a drawer. He spread it on the table. "Here is the garage." He tapped the map. "Now, did the Feds search the neighbourhood round here?"

Blandish leaned forward. "Yes," he said, "I know they did; they combed the whole place but found nothing. The extraordinary thing is that there has been no trace of the gang since then, or of the necklace. The three of them, with my daughter, have vanished into thin air."

Fenner leant forward, looking at Blandish.

"Tell me what you think," he said.

"I think my daughter is dead," Blandish said quietly. "I hope she is, otherwise——" He got to his feet abruptly and

walked over to the window. Fenner and Paula exchanged glances. They could feel the tense atmosphere of tragedy that surrounded Blandish.

"Will you consider things and get going?" Blandish said in a tired voice. "I want those men caught. I don't want them to get away with this. I should be more satisfied if they were killed than arrested. These crooks have so many ways of evading the law. I'll leave everything to you." He turned and went over to Fenner. "I'm glad I came to you. I think you'll do something. Will you let me know how you are progressing? I'll send you a cheque tonight."

Fenner got to his feet and walked over to him. He put his big hand on Blandish's arm and looked him in the face.

"I'll get those thugs," he said softly, "if it's the last thing I do."

Paula put her head round the door cautiously. Blandish had been gone a good half-hour, and the street clocks were striking five. Fenner was pacing up and down the small office, smoking furiously. She slid into the room and sat herself on the corner of the desk.

"Sherlock's mighty brain continues to pound on the problem," she murmured softly.

Fenner looked up, his brows knit and a hard expression in his eyes. "I guess Blandish was right when he said I'd work for that dough," he said. "This's goin' to be a tough proposition all right. It looks like I'm goin' to have a hard job to get started."

"What's the first move?" Paula asked, swinging her neat silk legs.

"The way I see it, Toots, is this. There's only one angle to follow, and that's the Borg dame. She sticks out in this case like a boil. The Feds are on to that, but they ain't uncovered anything. Borg's the only link we've got, so we've gotta make use of it. Okay; the first move is to contact Miss Borg." He scooped up the telephone and hastily dialled a number. "I wantta find out how helpful the local authorities are goin' to

already talked to Lowes and he was ready to give assistance.

"I'm glad you've come in on this, Dave," he said. "This job's costin' the State plenty. You, as an outside agent, can do a lot, and Blandish will foot the bill. We'll give you all the help you want."

Fenner nodded. "What about this Borg woman?" he asked. "Where's she now?"

"She pulled out of town about a month ago. She's got a new boy-friend, no other than our old friend Eddie Schultz. Remember him . . . the big guy who runs around with the Grisson gang? She gets tired of waiting for Riley and finds herself another meal-ticket. The Grisson mob have cleared out, too. They've moved to Springfield. The Old Wolf's come into money. Source unknown. I've had the boys go over her, but she talks of a backer and won't give names. We've nothing on her, so we can't get too nosy. Anyway, what the hell! She's gone into the entertainment business and runs a club."

Fenner raised his hat and scratched his head. "You've got a man taggin' Borg?" he asked.

Brennan shrugged. "Yeah, Doyley's watching her, but I guess it's a waste of time. She seems washed up with Riley, and this Schultz bird has sure knocked her plenty. Riley ain't goin' to show up on her any more. It's too obvious that we would watch Borg, and he ain't the type to risk his hide for a dame. I'll keep Doyley on for a little longer, then I'll have to set him to work on something else."

Fenner brooded. "Tell me, buddy, how do you really stand on this case?" he asked. "Forget I ever was a news-guy an' speak your mind."

Brennan shrugged hopelessly. "This is the damndest case I've ever had," he admitted. "No trace of Riley's mob, no trace of the girl, no trace of the money, and no trace of the necklace. We can't get started. Jeeze! The money we've spent on this case! We've had aircraft out, house-to-house searches, and we've put out a drag-net and roped in anyone who smells a bit off, but we ain't found a thing. It's a bitch of a case."

Fenner got to his feet. He looked worried. "You sure are encouragin'," he said; "but I guess I'd better get busy an' do

somethin'. I keep thinkin' of the dough I shall make if I crack this nut, an' it certainly has me steamed-up."

He shook hands with Brennan and turned to the door. Then a thought struck him and he shot out, "Where did this Borg dame work when she was around?"

"She did a bit of vaudeville work at the Cosmos Club, I believe," Brennan told him, "but she didn't have to work with Riley around."

"Cosmos Club? Sure, I know that joint. It's run by a Mex. I guess I'll look in an' have a little talk with him."

"He's a leery bird," Brennan said; "we've worked over him, but he didn't spill anything."

"He'll like me better than you professional dicks."

Outside in the street he paused to think. It was getting on for seven o'clock. Pete wouldn't be at the club yet. He thought that he would combine business with pleasure. He turned into a 'phone booth and rang up Paula. She answered at once.

"I'll stand you a feed after all," he said.

"Is that you, Micky?" she asked.

Fenner grinned into the 'phone. "You know who it is all right."

"Good gracious, I thought you'd got a date with the Borg woman."

"I would have, only she took it on the lam, so I've got to be content to take you out."

"I don't know if I'm free, hold on while I look at my appointment book . . ."

Fenner said, "I'll be around with the car right away," and hung up.

She was waiting for him on the doorstep when he swung the car to the kerb. He thought she looked swell and told her so.

"What's the idea?" she asked him as they drove away. "Why the sudden change in your plans?"

"I've seen Brennan, an' he thinks Pete might know a little something. Good enough . . . so we'll have dinner at the Cosmos, an' then I'll have a little chat with this Mex an' see just what he does know."

She relaxed into her seat. "I might have guessed it. I sit alone eating all by myself while you do the heavy off-stage."

He patted her knee. "You're doin' fine," he said. "Quit your beefing . . . ain't I buyin' you a meal?"

The Cosmos was doing good business when they arrived. There was some difficulty in getting a table. As soon as he had ordered the meal he asked the waiter if Pete was in.

The waiter nodded. "He's in the office."

Fenner looked at Paula with an apologetic grin. "I'm not wastin' time," he said. "You get on with the eats an' I'll join you in a little while."

She sighed. "Didn't I tell you that's the way it would go?"

He went across the room, passing the barrier behind which the professional dancers were sitting. One of the blondes dug up a come-hither smile and called softly, "Hello, handsome!"

"Hyah?" he returned, matching her smile. He didn't pause, but went on straight into Pete's office. Pete was enjoying a cigar. He was sitting in his shirt-sleeves. Fenner looked him over and then shut the door. Pete's eyes shifted, and he seemed uneasy.

"Hyah, Pete?" Fenner said. "Remember me?"

"Sure I remember you," Pete said uneasily. "What's the big idea, bustin' in like this?"

Fenner came over to the desk. "I wantta talk to you," he said coldly. "I ain't wastin' time with a yellow-belly like you, so here's what's comin' to you plenty if you don't spill what I want you to spill."

His fist, moving like a streak of lightning, thudded into Pete's face, sending the Mexican over backwards in his chair. He landed with a crash, his legs jammed under the desk. Fenner moved round quickly and, reaching down, closed his fist round Pete's shirt-front and hauled him to his feet. He stood the dazed man up against the wall and jolted his head back. The office door burst open, and two skinny wop waiters peered in nervously. Fenner looked at them, "Scram!" he said. "The boss an' me are busy." They hesitated a moment, then, seeing the hard eyes boring into them, they backed and shut the door again.

Pete was in a bad way. Blood was running down his chin and nose. Fenner slammed him into a chair.

"Okay, now we can start," he said viciously. "You're goin' to talk."

Pete cringed away and nodded wildly. "Sure I'll talk."

"You know Anna Borg?"

"Yeah, I know her."

"What was she to Riley?"

"She carried his gun . . . you know, when Riley went on a job she hung around with the gat. If the dicks pinched Riley they didn't find him rodded up. When he wanted to start trouble she was ready to slide the gun to him quick."

"Were they fond of each other?"

"Sure they were. They were like two love-birds. They fought all day an' made it up night-time." Pete groped about for a handkerchief and began to pat his nose gingerly.

"Yet Riley ditched her when he put the finger on the Blandish dame?"

"Yeah, he did her dirt that time."

"How did she get in with Eddie Schultz?"

Pete hesitated and Fenner slapped him around the ears. "Get goin', you grease-ball, or I'll get tough."

"She met Eddie here. Eddie made me get her down here. He said Ma Grisson wanted him to talk to her. I left them together," Pete mumbled.

Fenner wondered what Ma Grisson wanted with this Borg woman. "Well? Go on, go on, let's have it."

"Honest, I don't know anythin' more," Pete groaned. "He used to come to the club an' see her a lot after that, an' when they opened up in Springfield she left me an' joined up with Schultz. I don't know a thing more . . . honest I don't."

Fenner looked him over and decided that he was speaking the truth. He stood away from him and lit a cigarette. He felt faintly excited. He had already got just a little something new. Ma Grisson was interested in Anna Borg. Why? There was no use wasting time; he'd got to see this dame.

"Okay, Pete, the heat's off you for a while. Take it easy, but don't go doin' things you oughtn't."

He turned to the door, and as he did so he caught a savage gleam in Pete's eye. A vindictive, satisfied smirk spread over the Mexican's face. Fenner paused and grinned to himself. He quietly picked up a chair and, opening the door suddenly, thrust the chair through the doorway. A small, wiry wop sprang forward and swung a leaded stick. He hit the chair hard before he could pull his stroke. Fenner drove the chair at him like a battering-ram and struck him low down.

The wop curled up with a grunt of anguish and Fenner swooped down on him; seizing him by an arm and a leg, he tossed him violently into Pete's astonished face. He paused long enough to see the two men go over with a crash, then, grinning widely, he entered the dance-room. The blonde behind the barrier was leaning forward with her neck craned, watching. She looked at him with open admiration. "A real tough guy," she said softly.

"Sure, baby," Fenner returned, not pausing in his walk. "But I could be mighty soft with a honey like you."

He found Paula enjoying herself. She had ordered an expensive wine and she had nearly completed her meal. Fenner put his hand under her arm and raised her from the chair.

"You're not goin' to dance?" she asked, pleased.

"You're right, I ain't," he returned. "Grab your wrap; we're leavin'." He looked over his shoulder at the office. "I guess we ain't goin' to be too popular in a minute, so this is where we scram." He shoved some money at the startled waiter and walked quickly out of the club, still holding her arm.

"Isn't this sweet?" she said. "You're not taking me home, by chance?"

He grinned down at her. "You know all the answers, don't you?" he said. "You're goin' to pack. We're off to Springfield tonight."

The entrance to the Paradise Club was up a side alley off the main street on the East side. The alley was usually pitch

dark except for the glow of the neon letters that spelt out the name of the club.

The door to the club was of three-inch steel with a small window of bullet-proof glass let in, conveniently adjusted to investigate visitors. There was a bell-push on the side of the door and a code of long and short rings that pleased the members. The door was never opened to anyone who did not give the code ring. The membership was not very large, but the members brought friends, and a number of taxi-drivers brought suckers who were looking for girls, so the place did good business.

The club was on the first floor and the stairs were broad with a barrier and a little gate at the head. The barrier was of steel, and small loopholes were cleverly masked. Beyond the barrier was the cloak-room. The check-girl was hand-picked and generally caused a small riot in the reception hall. She wore a short red coat and white silk trousers about a size and a half too small for her in the seat.

The reception hall was white-and-gilt with a heavy pile carpet. Beyond that, through another steel door, was the restaurant and the dance-floor. Beyond that, the office where Ma Grisson ran the club. Upstairs was nobody's business.

The Grisson mob had settled down. They had done themselves well and the club was making money. Springfield didn't take to them, but that didn't keep them awake at night. They were a tough gang and they didn't have to worry about things like that. It was serious for the small gangs that had flourished before their coming, and Rocco soon found that they played hell with his rackets.

Rocco was an unusual type of hoodlum. For one thing, he worked alone. This in itself was original; but he had brains, and he felt safer playing a lone hand, and happier when he didn't have to split his takings. He had worked up several small, paying rackets, nothing very big and nothing very dangerous. He was unimportant enough not to excite the authorities, and he only pulled small jobs that would prove profitable and safe.

He ran three taxi-cabs. On the face of it, harmless enough,

but those cabs were linked closely with shady clip joints and he drew a satisfactory rake-off on a percentage basis. Now and then, when he thought he could get away with it, he used the cabs for a little white-slaving. Should some helpless-looking judy with sufficiently pleasing exterior hire one of these cabs it might possibly be the last that was heard of her. This brought him in a nice slice, but he didn't often think the risk worth the dough. His real income was derived from the numbers racket. He got himself a job as a collector, as soon as he saw the possibilities of this system of illegal gambling. His choice was wise because it was comparatively safe and certainly profitable. All he had to do was to find someone who wished to try his luck. He received a rake-off of ten per cent of the backer's win, plus a fat tip from the backer. Besides the numbers racket, he had made for himself a nice little corner in protection. This was only in operation amongst very small-time shopkeepers, but they willingly paid him ten dollars a week for his goodwill. So, taking it all round, Rocco was on to a nice thing . . . until the Grisson mob moved in.

The first indication he had that they were going to cause trouble was when one of his taxi-drivers burst into his small office which he rented in a large block on a main street. The man was almost crying with rage. Rocco looked up sharply, his little black eyes startled.

"I'm quittin'!" the man shouted at him. "I ain't standin' for it any longer!"

"What are you yellin' about?" Rocco asked, getting to his feet.

"There are six new cabs on the road an' they're made of steel. I've been crowded off the road by those punks all day, an' I ain't takin' any more chances . . . I'm through!"

Rocco was seriously alarmed. "I ain't seen any new cabs . . ." he began.

"Maybe you ain't . . . but that doesn't say they ain't on the road. I tell you it's a frame-up to get you off the road. How would you like to have some bum forcing you into the kerb all day at a high speed? I've saved my neck up to now . . . but I ain't takin' any more chances."

"I'll fix that . . ." Rocco said through his teeth.

Almost before the words were out of his mouth a dull crash, followed by shouts in the street, made them both run to the window. Far below was one of his cabs lying on its side, the off-wheels revolving slowly. They were getting the driver out of the wreckage even as Rocco watched. A brightly painted cab was standing near by, and the taxi-driver clutched Rocco's arm.

"There you are," he said. "That's one of them . . . now do you see? It's a frame-up. By tomorrow you won't have a cab left. Give me my dough. . . . I'm guttin'."

Rocco took out his wallet and paid the man his salary. He didn't say anything, but he was very thoughtful. His native caution warned him to go slow. He made some inquiries to find out just how tough this Grisson mob was. It did not take him long to realize that he was up against an outfit who could flatten him as easily as they could flatten a fly on the wall.

With Southern resignation he accepted the inevitable and withdrew his cabs. This meant a loss of income, so he raised his protection prices. This lasted only for a week, when the next set-back occurred. Going round for his weekly rake-off, he was met with the same answer.

"I'm sorry, mister, but I've been told to pay protection to the Grisson mob . . . they say that if you start trouble they'll look after us."

By this time Rocco was getting in a frenzy. He decided to do something about it. He took himself round to the Paradise Club and introduced himself.

Ma Grisson had him in her office. Slim and Eddie stood behind her, watching him with contempt. Rocco stood in front of Ma's desk, and carefully put his bowler hat on the floor. He looked at Ma with a completely blank face, and she looked at him equally without interest.

"I have three cabs," he began in his soft voice. "I thought maybe I could do some business for you. My drivers take people to clubs and recommend the right places. Can't we arrange some business in that way?"

"We've got all the cabs we want . . . if we want more we'll

put them on the road. We ain't looking for competitors, but if we have 'em they'll get run off the road," Ma said.

Rocco raised his shoulders apologetically.

"My cabs are good——" he began.

Ma finished the interview. "You heard what I said. We've moved in, an' we're the big-shots around here. If you don't like it . . . say so, an' we'll fix it for you."

Rocco bent down to pick up his hat. His face was expressionless. He could do nothing. "I thought we might do something there, but we can't . . . no?"

"No," Ma told him, and that was that.

Rocco went back to his numbers racket and had a thin time. He promised himself, however, that when the opportunity arrived—and he was sufficiently faithful in fate to believe that an opportunity would arrive—he would settle his differences to his own satisfaction.

A week after his first interview with Ma he got himself introduced to the club through a member. The actual business did not get going until after the theatres, and a small group of hoodlums were amusing themselves in a crap game. Rocco joined them and found himself next to a fat blonde with whom he had been extremely intimate in the past. Rocco was glad that he had found her again as her technique was extraordinary, even if she was as large as a house.

Eddie wasn't playing, but he wandered round the table, showing off his new tuxedo. He walked over to the cloak-room.

"Anna shown up yet?" he asked.

The check-girl was reading a lurid novelette. She looked up impatiently and shook her head. Just then Slim slouched up the stairs. His yellow eyes were half-closed with fatigue.

"Hyah, Slim?" Eddie said. "You seen Anna?"

Slim leant against the wall. "No, I ain't seen her," he said indifferently; "she'll be along."

"Some of the boys have blown in," Eddie told him; "they're inside, playin' crap."

Slim sneered. "Small-town stuff," he said.

"Rocco's in there an' he's found himself a judy."

Slim looked up quickly. "Rocco? What's he want round here?"

"Rocco's all right . . . he won't start anythin'. He's scared of us."

Slim looked mean. "Rocco's two-faced. I don't want him here."

Eddie shrugged. "He's spendin' dough, so what?"

Slim walked past him into the restaurant. He sidled past the group at the table. Rocco was enjoying himself. The big blonde sat close to him, giggling and chattering like a monkey. Slim sneered and the blonde, looking up, caught him at it.

"Hello, handsome. You gotta pain in your tail?"

Slim stood very still. "Tell your chippy to lay off me," he said to Rocco.

Rocco stopped smiling. His face stiffened. "What did you say?" he asked.

The others at the table quietly pushed their chairs back and looked at each other uneasily.

Slim said coldly, "I said, 'Tell your chippy to lay off me.'"

Rocco got slowly to his feet. He was half the size of Slim, but he was mad. Slim's yellow eyes didn't throw any scare into him. The office door at the end of the room suddenly opened and Ma Grisson bounced out; she was holding a riot-gun and she looked mean.

"Cut that stuff!" she bawled. "Rocco, take that blonde yapper outta here; and you, Slim, get to hell upstairs! This's a sweet thing, startin' a rough house in my joint! I won't have it, so get that straight!"

The tension was broken, and even Rocco dug up a smile. "Okay, I'll scram," he said. He went off with his blonde, and the rest of the gang drifted away. The bell downstairs began to ring in jerky bursts. Ma laid down the gun and went off to the kitchens to start the wheels moving. Three jaded musicians climbed on to the low stage and began to swing it hot. Waiters materialized and took up their stations. The stage was set for another night's work.

Slim, still feeling mean, went upstairs. He entered a room at the end of the passage. Miss Blandish was filing her nails

in front of a mirror. The room was richly furnished in bad taste and looked like a crazy movie-set. Miss Blandish was in a silk dressing-gown, and her long legs were crossed. The dressing-gown fell open across her knees, but she made no movement to cover herself when she heard Slim walk in. She didn't even look up, but went on filing her nails as if he hadn't entered.

Slim looked at her and sat on the bed. He was feeling tired. He had been arranging for a load of liquor, and the day had been a heavy one. There was still money to be made supplying liquor, although repeal had come in. The authorities imposed a tax. The Grisson mob soon found a way to turn this into money. They contracted unbonded liquor from an illegal still and arranged for consignments to come regularly to the club. There was a risk in getting the stuff into the club, and Slim had to look after that angle. Once the liquor was in, the rest was easy. They had a supply of empty bottles complete with the genuine stamps and labels, and all they had to do was to fill the bottles and sell them at the usual rates, thereby putting the tax in their own pockets. They were making a nice line in this way.

Slim half lay on the bed, content to watch her file her nails. He let his eye run over her thick red hair and travel slowly over her figure with the detached eye of a tired man.

"Ma been to see you today?" he asked.

Miss Blandish folded her hands in her lap and looked at him. He was sitting behind her in the shadow. The small table-lamp lit up her reflection in the mirror.

"Yes," she said in a far-away voice.

"I didn't want her to see me, so I came up the back way," Slim said. "She's always wanting me to do somethin'." He lay back on the bed, looking up at the ceiling. "She doesn't like you. If she had her way, you'd be at the bottom of the river. When I was a kid, I lived so close to the river I could spit into it from my window." He rubbed the side of his nose thoughtfully with his thumb. "I saw 'em take a dame out of the river once. She had hair just like yours. Yeah, she'd been in a long time. The rats had eaten away half her face. It didn't give me

the heebies, but the copper spewed." He giggled. "But I won't let her do that to you. I'm nice to you, ain't I? This is a swell room. A lot of judies'd like a room like this. I bet Eddie's dame'd like it. She's just trash—ain't like you."

Miss Blandish moved restlessly. "I want to go to sleep," she said.

Slim wasn't listening. He was held by his thoughts. "Ma's smart," he went on; "she got this club. It's pretty good down there. They've got a band. The fellas in the band wear short white coats. They look like they own the world, but they've gotta do what I tell them. If I want a tune they have to play it." He picked his teeth with a pin; turning his head, he spat into the darkness. "Anna dances down there. She fools around with a couple of fans—know why?" He giggled. "She ain't got anythin' on. I know she hasn't 'cos I've seen her. She ain't much to look at, but some of the old guys like her. I tell you it's pretty good down there. One of these days we'll go down and dance together. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

She didn't say anything.

He sat up. "I said you'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Still she said nothing.

"Come here," he said.

She got to her feet at once and moved over to him, standing in front of him, her arms hanging limply at her sides. He pulled her down on the bed beside him. She gazed into his face blankly as if her brain refused to function. For a moment a small spark of resistance burnt up and her face curled a little in terror, but then she went blank again. The effort was too much for her.

Slim fondled her. "You're pretty," he whispered. "I like havin' you around. The other dames are hard. They always want to get something out of me. You ain't like that."

She said, "I want to go to sleep."

"Okay." He got up. "I gotta get downstairs, anyway. You got everything?" He clumsily pulled off her wrap and pulled the sheets over her. She lay still, looking at him with her great, blank eyes, and he turned his head sharply away. Those eyes gave him the jitters. It was like fooling with a corpse.

He went downstairs again. The crowd was coming in fast and he hung about the reception hall, watching the people hand in their coats. Eddie came out of the restaurant. He looked worried.

"You seen Anna?" he asked Slim.

The check-girl, leaning over the partition, said shrilly, "She's coming up now."

Anna Borg ran up the stairs quickly. She was sleek and trim and slightly breathless. Eddie went to meet her with a hard look.

"What's the big idea? I've been waiting for you over an hour."

Anna stopped short. "Well, what do you make of that?" she demanded in a loud voice to the hall in general. "Can't a girl take a little time puttin' on her rags without you startin' to beef? Think I'd run away or somethin'?"

Eddie looked round uneasily. "Pipe down, baby," he urged. "I tell you you're late."

Anna shrugged impatiently and whipped off her cloak, which the check-girl took from her indifferently. "What if I am? No need for you to make a row like an elephant in childbirth, is there?"

"Okay, okay. Come on in an' have a drink."

"I got to get ready for my act. Go an' buy yourself one an' drown yourself in it." She flounced away from him. Eddie grinned a little ruefully. She was a tough baby, he told himself.

Slim, who had been watching, said: "Why don't you take a swing at that chippy? She's gettin' too big for her pants."

Eddie eyed him and sneered. "Maybe, but she don't need dope to sleep with me."

Slim went livid. That crack hit him in his softest spot and he curled up under it. Eddie left him and joined a party who were drinking in the restaurant. Slim felt someone looking at him curiously and turned his twisted face quickly. A short, powerfully built man had just come up the stairs. He gave his hat to the check-girl and stood talking. His hard face looked pleasant enough as he kidded the girl along. She started to make a big play for him, but he shook his head with a grin.

"No, Toots, I've outgrown that stuff," he said. Her pout slid into a smile when he tossed a buck into the plate. He looked again at Slim and then walked into the restaurant.

"Who's that guy?" Slim came over quickly.

"Name's Flagherty," she said. "New member, registered a couple of days ago. Introduced by Mason."

"He looks like a dick. Ma in the office?"

She nodded. "I think he's a right guy."

"You'd think any palooka's a right guy if he fed you a buck now an' then," Slim snarled at her. He walked quickly into the office. Ma was smoking a cigar, adding up a ledger.

"Scram," she said, not looking up. "I'm busy."

"Who's this Flagherty bird?"

Ma looked up angrily. "Can't you see I'm busy? I gotta get——"

"Who's this Flagherty bird?" Slim repeated in a louder voice.

"How should I know? One of Mason's pals."

"Listen, Ma—that guy looks like a bull to me."

Ma put her pen down. Her eyes narrowed and she nodded. "Maybe you're right. There is somethin' phoney about that fella. You'd better keep an eye on him."

"You bet I'll keep an eye on him," Slim said viciously. He walked into the restaurant again and stood looking round impatiently. He saw that Flagherty was sitting at a little table at the far end, near the band. He was talking to one of the professional "gimme girls". Slim gave Doc the high-sign, and Doc left his chair and joined him.

"That guy that's just come in. I think he's a bull."

Doc looked nervous. "How did he get in?"

"Mason got him in," Slim said, speaking rapidly. "Mason's all right, but I'd like to know something about this other guy." He went back to the cloak-room. "Mason showed up?" he asked.

"He won't be in tonight," the check-girl told him. "He's always on the dot."

Slim shrugged. "Okay. Watch him, Doc, and pass the word round. That guy ain't to go upstairs, no matter what . . . get that?"

Doc nodded. "I'll wise up the boys." He turned and went back to the restaurant. There was a slight lull. The band had stopped playing and a buzz of talk was hushed as the band leader minced his way to the mike. "Now, folks," he said, "here's the big act you're waitin' for. You all know what to expect by now. Tonight, Miss Anna Borg is givin' you just another of her wonderful passion dances. Oh, boy! Does she know her stuff or does she? Is she lovely or is she? You ask the drummer . . . he knew her when the bubble burst. Now, folks, a big hand for the little lady. Miss . . . Anna . . . Borg!"

The drummer ran a roll as the lights dimmed. A spasmodic applause broke out round the tables. Anna appeared suddenly on the stage, and the electrician lit her with a spot. She wore a long white net dress, and underneath she was naked. The spotlight shining full on her made the dress look solid; but when another spot got to work behind her, the guests saw plenty. The band broke into something hot, and she stood and sang. She certainly gave that song the works. Her voice was low and rich, and she could tear the top notes down without effort. As she sang she moved about the room. No one made a pass at her because Eddie lounged about quite close, but there were a mighty lot of fidgety hands in that room, all the same. At the end of the song she got a big hand. Some of the men who had hit the liquor hard stood up and shouted at her.

The lights went lower still and faded right out. The whole room was just blackness and smoke-haze. There she stood, in a blue light, in the middle of the floor, with every eye fixed on her. She just stood swaying to the music, and then she began to undo the dress with tantalizing slowness. The spot focused to a small circle which just lit her face, the rest of her body was a shadowy white form. She dropped the dress at her feet and began to glide round the room with the spot chasing her. Sometimes it caught her and sometimes it didn't. She moved with incredible ease and speed. The room got properly steamed-up when the spot caught her in unexpected places. Then she was back by her dress and had slipped into it as the lights flashed up. The crowd howled their appreciation. She knew her job all right, and she always went down big. She blew kisses

as she ran up lightly to the platform and, turning, waved to the crowd, before ducking behind the curtain that covered her exit.

Slim had been watching her with a bored eye. She'd got a shape all right, but no class, he told himself. She was just a small-town chippy. He glanced over at Flagherty's table and suddenly stiffened. Under cover of the darkness Flagherty had pulled his freight. The little table where he had been sitting was deserted.

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Fenner got into Springfield in the early morning. Paula sat beside him in the car, heavy-eyed and weary from the all-night drive.

"Pinkerton never sleeps," she murmured drowsily.

"Ain't safe with you around," Fenner returned. "As this is our first job for months, what have you been doin' all this time?"

They drove down a couple of blocks in silence.

"I suppose you're going to snatch a little sleep some time?" she asked at last.

"I am, but it'll have to be a short one."

"Suppose we get married and pretend this is our honeymoon?"

Fenner grinned. "You're screwy," he said. "There are five hundred grand hangin' on to this job, an' you ain't worth all that dough."

She sighed. "I thought you'd feel that way about it."

The street clocks indicated seven-thirty when he pulled up outside a quiet little hotel. He jogged her with his elbow. "This is the joint," he said. "Go in an' book two rooms, will you? Don't forget I said two rooms. I want some sleep for a couple of hours."

"I'd rather bed with a porcupine," she said, getting out of the car.

He paused midway between changing gears. "Yeah," he said thoughtfully, "that's an idea. Lookin' at it from every

angle, it certainly might have its excitements." He drove the car round to the garage, and when he got back he found her dozing over the reception desk, watched by an interested clerk. "Never mind her," Fenner said to him, "she's got sleepy sickness." He took her by the arm and led her gently to the lift. The boy took their grips and followed with a wide grin. Their rooms were next to each other and he pushed her into one of them. "There you go," he said. "Take a good sleep, an' I'll ring you when I want you. When you've had enough sleep, 'phone down for some books, but don't leave your room until I ring."

"That's right," she complained, walking into the room wearily, "leave me out of it."

He grinned and softly shut the door on her. Going into his room he took off his coat, jerked away his tie and, kicking off his shoes, threw himself on the bed. He slept heavily until ten o'clock, then sat up, feeling like hell. He rang the bell impatiently and put his head in a basin of cold water. By the time the boy had brought him a long high-ball he began to feel more himself. He swung down the stairs and made his way quickly to the garage.

It took him ten minutes to locate the address Brennan had given him. He found Doyley waiting for him. He took him upstairs to his room and seemed genuinely pleased to see him. "Just to keep the records straight," Doyley told him, "I'm known as Flagherty here, so watch that, will you?"

"Sure," Fenner said, resting himself on the horse-hair couch. "Brennan told me you're watchin' this Borg dame. I guess he's put you wise that I wantta little help."

Flagherty brought out a bottle of Scotch and mixed a couple of stiff drinks. "You private dicks give me a pain," he said good-humouredly. "You work for money an' I work for glory."

Fenner poured the drink down his throat and pushed the glass back again. Flagherty gave him another.

"I ain't so sure that I'm gettin' any dough," Fenner said with a wry face. "This case is tough. How you gettin' on? Had any breaks?"

Flagherty scratched his head. "There's something phoney goin' on at the Paradise," he said. "That's the Grissons' joint, you know. I was out there last night an' I nearly ran into trouble. This Borg dame does a strip-act there most nights, an' I persuaded a member to get me in. Well, while this dame was doin' her stuff--an' can she do it!--I thought I'd do a bit of gumshoeing under cover of the dark. Okay. This is the way it went. I slid out into the hall as soon as the lights went off an' went into the can. I could watch the check-girl from there. Her position is just by the stairs, an' I told myself that I wanted to have a look up there. So I wait until she wraps herself round a dime novel, an' when she is busy I crawl outta the can and beat it upstairs. I do this quick, an' I get upstairs without her knowin' it . . . which is nice work. Well, I gumshoe around an' stick my head round a few doors, but don't find anythin' to start me goin' except I guess there's plenty goin' on at that joint to justify a raid, because all the rooms have double beds, an' they all look ready for business. I get to the end of the passage and notice a door with a Yale lock on it. This looks phoney to me. I'm about to investigate when I hear the crowd downstairs shoutin' an' yellin', an' that tells me that the strip-act's over. I guess, too, that the lights have gone up, an' mother's little boy is among the missin'.

"I beetle back down the passage like a streak, but I'm not quick enough. The long, thin slob's comin' up with a high turn of speed. I just manage to duck into a bedroom as he arrives. He beats it down to the locked door and takes a key outta his pocket and in he goes. This gives me a break, an' I beat it downstairs. Now this check-girl an' I've got friendly in a friendly way, which is a good thing, because this crowd is a mean one, an' I think to myself that I might easily run into trouble. I give her a handful of bucks an' tell her that I had a faint feelin' an' had gone upstairs to cool off. She's wise enough to rumble what's happenin' and gives me my hat an' coat quick, an' I blow."

"The locked room sounds interestin'," Fenner said. "You gotta be careful from now on."

Flagherty nodded. "Sure, I'm goin' to be mighty careful.

I'm off this job tomorrow. The chief tells me that I ain't earnin' my keep. I reckon he's right at that. I've been sittin' on that dame's tail for two months, an' not a crack from any of them."

Fenner got to his feet. "Okay. I'm havin' a look at her. Where do I find her?"

"She's got a nice little apartment downtown," Flagherty told him. "Take it easy, won't you? Schultz hangs around there, an' he's a tough bird."

"I like 'em tough," Fenner said with a grin. "There's more to push round when they're big."

Flagherty scribbled the address on a piece of paper, and Fenner went off with it. He glanced at his watch when he got into the street. It was just after eleven o'clock. The sun was hot and he was glad that he had a drink under his belt. He had no difficulty in locating Anna's apartment. It was a large block standing at the corner of a main street. He examined the row of mail-boxes and found she was on the fourth floor. He took the automatic lift up. The apartment was a large one and had the floor to itself. He walked to the front door and jabbed the bell-push. The door was opened by a coloured maid. She looked him over with open insolence.

"Miss Borg in?" he asked.

"Not at this hour she ain't."

Fenner reached out a hand and jerked the woman into the passage. "Stay here an' wait," he said. He entered the apartment and shut the front door, leaving the woman speechlessly gaping. He stepped into the living-room. It was empty. He came back to the hall and stood listening. Down the passage he could hear voices. He pulled his Luger out and trod silently down the passage. He listened again outside a door and then jerked it open and went in.

Eddie was sitting on the bed talking to Anna. They both turned swiftly as Fenner walked in. They saw the gun and froze.

"'Morning, folks," Fenner said, leaning against the doorway. "I feel right mean bustin' in this love-nest, but business before pleasure."

Eddie looked round the room hurriedly. His eyes fell on a heap of clothing on a chair by the window. It was a long jump. Fenner followed his eyes and grinned. "I wouldn't," he said. "I ain't lookin' for trouble, but I can give it as well as take it."

"Who the hell are you?" Anna demanded from the bed.

Fenner waved the gun at her. "I want a little talk with you," he said. "Let's all sit down an' have a get-together."

He walked over to the chair by the window. Fumbling amongst the pile of clothes, he found Eddie's gun. He slipped the magazine out and tossed the gun back. He put the magazine into his pocket. Then he sat down.

Eddie leant forward. "What do you want?" he asked. "What the hell——?"

"Okay, okay." Fenner grinned. "I'll be seein' quite a lot of you mugs before I've finished, an' I thought I'd just look you over." He shoved the gun back into its holster. "Now, I suggest your boy-friend takes himself for a walk, an' you and I have a little talk."

Eddie came at him like a cat. Fenner was waiting for him. He was out of the chair before Eddie reached him and blocked the right swing that Eddie tossed over. His own fist came up with a thud into Eddie's face. It was a peach of a punch with everything Fenner had behind it, and that was plenty. Eddie slumped forward on his hands and knees and then spread out flat. Fenner blew on his knuckles.

"These guys ain't so tough," he said.

Anna was sitting up in the bed, her eyes wide and dangerous. She had a .25 in her hand. "Reach!" she said in a hard voice. Fenner grinned at her, but he kept his hands still. At that range a .25 would not be so good.

"You sure keep plenty of cannons round this joint," he said amiably.

Anna cautiously pulled back the bedclothes and slipped on to the floor. Her eyes never left him, nor did the gun waver. Her scarlet pyjamas, with a black monogram on the pocket, showed off her figure. Fenner thought that most men would have raised a ringing cheer at the sight of it. He didn't feel like cheering at the moment, which was just too bad.

"Don't you catch cold," he said.

"Now, Mr. Wise Guy, we'll fix you where we want you." She jerked the gun to an armchair. "Sit down."

Fenner didn't move. "Listen, Toots," he said quietly. "I want a little talk with you. I'm sorry I had to get tough with the boy-friend, but he started the fireworks."

"Sit down," she snapped. Fenner shrugged and collapsed into the chair; he crossed his legs.

She moved round the back of him and, slipping her hand over his shoulder into the inside of his coat, she jerked his Luger out and tossed it on to the bed. Her gun was pressing against the back of his neck the whole time, and he felt a faint tingling in his feet as the cold metal dug into him. He was glad when she took the gun away. He watched her move over to Eddie and turn his body over with her foot. He was still out.

"Nice smack, that," Fenner said; "he won't come round for some time yet."

Anna's eyes narrowed. He thought she had plenty of fire in her.

"Come on, spill it," she said. "Who are you?"

Fenner folded his arms. "I'm the guy who's interested in your late meal-ticket," he said. "I'm lookin' for Riley."

"So you're a bull, are you?" she sneered.

"No, I ain't." Fenner scowled at her. "I'm a news-hawk. I wantta find this guy Riley bad, an' I figger that you might give me a line on him. Now listen, honey; why not help?"

Anna drew herself up. "There's one thing I hate more than a bull, an' that's a nosy press man. You get outta here, an' stay outta here."

Fenner put on a winning smile, but it made Anna wince. "Come on, baby, don't get tough."

"You get outta here right now. Comin' bustin' in like this, rough-housin' all over my joint. Go on, get goin'; and remember, the next time you start an act like this your relations'll go into mourning."

Fenner got to his feet slowly. "Okay," he said regretfully; "I'm on my way." He pulled open the door, then hesitated. "It was a bad break when Riley took a run-out on you. Gee!

He must've been a crazy guy to pass up on a honey like you."

A deep red burnt up her throat and into her face, and her eyes flashed angrily.

"Get goin' and keep that big mouth of yours shut."

"Sure I'm goin', but it sure makes me mad to think he's playin' around with some cheap little chiseller while you're sittin' on your fanny, waitin' for him to take you back."

Anna crossed the room with a rush. "Where do you get that stuff?" she shrilled at him. She was so furious that she waved the gun in his face. "Get out! Does it look as if I'm waiting for that punk?"

Fenner shoved his hat to the back of his head. "Okay, I'm only tellin' you what the town's sayin'."

"Well, it's a lousy lie!" Anna stormed. "I wouldn't have that double-crossing jerk back if he had his claws in the Federal Reserve."

Fenner suddenly took the gun out of her hand. She had been so mad that she just waved it about, and he took her by surprise. Instantly she made a dive for the bed where his Luger lay. Fenner shot after her and hit her in the small of her back with his knees. He slammed her face down on the bed and sat on her shoulders until he scooped up the gun, then he rolled her over; kneeling astride her, he pinned her arms down with his knees.

"Okay, baby; now we can have a nice little chat."

For a moment she was speechless with rage. Her large eyes were stormy and her lips drawn back off her teeth. Then she began to swear at him. He let her run for a minute or so, then he slapped her lightly across her mouth.

"I'm surprised at you," he said, looking pained. "I ain't keepin' you long like this. I guess it ain't so comfortable, but if you will get tough . . . I ask you. Just one little question an' then I'll scam. Only one question, baby, and here it is. Where was Riley when you last heard from him? That's all. Tell me that, an' I'll beat it."

"You go to hell," Anna stormed, glaring at him. "I'm not telling you a thing. You find out for yourself."

"I certainly will," he said. "I've plenty of ways to make little girls like you come across." He shifted his knees so that her arms were free, and as they came up he seized her wrists in his hands. "Now, I'm just goin' to fix you so that you won't be causin' trouble." He swung off her, and holding her wrists in one hand he untied the pyjama cord at her waist and pulled the cord through the loops. He shoved it into his pocket and stepped away from her. She hastily grabbed her trousers and held on to them tightly.

"No more fightin'," he grinned. "Maybe you do show yourself off in a clip joint, but I guess you're too much of a lady to do it in here."

Anna sat there, livid with rage. "I'm going to get you for this, you cheap heel."

Fenner laughed. "Be your age, baby," he said. "This's the funniest thing that's ever happened to you." He went over to the small portable electric stove standing in the corner of the room and switched on the current.

"Grand things, these stoves. I'm goin' to dump this on your boy-friend's pan when it's hot enough—if you don't spill things."

They both watched the filaments turn red. He picked up the stove. "What's it to be?" he asked. "I could get a hell of a kick clappin' this poultice on that rat's mug, but I'll hold off if you're goin' to play ball."

She had lost colour. "He was at Johnny's," she said in a small, scared voice.

"Johnny the rummy?" he asked, swinging the stove in his hand.

She nodded, and he put the stove back and jerked the switch with his foot. Fenner knew Johnny all right. Most people who were in with the hoodlums knew Johnny. He told himself that he was doing fine.

"Okay, sister," he said. "Sorry to crash in like this." He jerked open the door. Anna sat motionless. He turned back and tossed the cord into her lap. "Make your securities safe," he said with a little grin. "Sorry to have pushed you around."

Anna began to call him names again, but Fenner was hardened to abuse.

"You had better wash your mouth out," he said. "It ain't too clean." And he pulled the door behind him before the storm broke.

Downstairs he spotted a 'phone booth and called Paula. Her voice came over the line after a delay that infuriated him.

"Wake up, hophead!" he shouted. "Things are poppin'."

"Well, well," she answered back. "Why didn't you call in and see me before you went off? I got myself up like Mae West and paid you an early visit, but you'd gone."

"Will you give your useless mouth a rest and get this? I'm scrammin' out to Johnny's shack. You know where that is? You do? Swell. Now, listen, baby, this is serious. Get hold of Brennan an' tell him to come over to Johnny's right away. I'll have the Grisson mob on my heels in a short while, if I don't get my bet wrong. . . so snap into it. 'Bye, baby, I'll be seein' you soon," and he hung up.

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Slim looked at Eddie and Anna, his yellow eyes blazing with cold fury.

"You mean to tell me you let some lousy headline-hunter come in here an' push you around?" he shouted at Eddie. "Hell! You goin' soft or somethin'?"

Eddie felt his jaw uneasily. "Listen, Slim; this guy was tough. I ain't ever been hit so hard. Ask Anna—she'll tell you how tough he was."

Slim turned his eyes on Anna. "What did this punk want?" he demanded. "What happened after he had put Eddie away?"

"Plenty," Anna snarled. She was sitting up in bed. Her eyes glittered viciously. "This heel wanted to know where Riley was when he 'phoned me for the last time."

Slim and Eddie suddenly stiffened. Eddie shot a warning glance at Slim. "So what?" Slim asked.

"Well, he was going to get funny with the stove, so I told him."

There was a heavy silence. The two men stood there thinking rapidly. Anna looked at them. She was puzzled why they were taking it like that. After all, she told herself, they weren't in this. If Riley did get pinched, why should they care? She tried to make herself plain. "Listen; this guy was going to put the stove on your face," she said patiently to Eddie. "He wasn't bluffing, and I wasn't standing for it. Don't you get it? He was the type to get a big kick out of frying someone's face with a red-hot stove. Riley don't mean a thing to me, so I split it."

Slim turned on her savagely. "You yapper!" he shouted.

Anna flew into another furious rage. "Did you hear what that slob called me?" she screamed at Eddie. "I'm not standing for it! Do you get that! I didn't give any of you guys away. What the hell does Riley matter to you?"

Eddie hastily climbed into his clothes. "Skip it, will you?" he pleaded. "Slim don't mean anythin'. Take it easy, for Pete's sake."

Anna struggled out of bed, clutching her trousers with one hand. "If this jerk thinks he can get fresh with me, he's wearing the wrong pants," she shrilled. "Listen, you long slob . . ."

Slim came at her with a sliding shuffle, but Eddie got between them. "For the love of Mike!" he said. He pushed Anna on to the bed. "Forget it, honey," he went on. "Listen; I've got a job on. You don't think I'm stayin' around here an' let a tough get away with this, do you? Come on outta here, Slim; come on, let's get goin'."

Slim looked at Anna, who made a face at him. He hesitated for a moment, then lounged to the door. Eddie crowded him out. Going downstairs, Slim began to bellyache, but Eddie cut him short. "Forget it," he said impatiently. "I gotta do some-thin' about this news-guy. If ever Anna got on to the truth, I reckon she'd turn mighty mean."

Slim shrugged. "If she speaks outta turn, she'll get rubbed out."

Eddie stopped and jerked Slim round. "Get this!" he snapped. "You got your dame, I'm havin' mine! Anna's a

swell kid an' I'm stayin' with her. She's not to know about this . . . do you understand?"

"All right, all right." Slim moved on impatiently. "Ma's got to be in on this quick."

Ma Grisson listened while Eddie went through the story. Then she started to her feet. "Damn that squealing broad," she stormed. "Do you see what this means? Your blasted chippy's blown the lid right off! It's women! Women! Women! Always the same! Barker . . . Karpis . . . Dillinger . . . they all went the same way . . . because of women! That's all you suckers think about . . . jazzing your goddam floozies! This news-guy'll beat it back to Johnny as hard as he can lick—then what d'you think'll happen?"

Eddie scratched his head. "Johnny's all right," he said uneasily. "Johnny won't squeal."

"This guy sounds tough," Ma stormed on. "Johnny's a rummy an' he'll crack fast enough if this guy starts pushin' him around. Can you see Johnny keepin' his mouth shut if he's gettin' fried with a stove? Not likely. Johnny's goin' to open his mouth so wide that you'll see all the booze floatin' inside him."

The others looked at each other. Flynn reached inside his coat and pulled out his gun. He slipped out the magazine, glanced at it, and then put it back. Ma watched him. She nodded. "Sure. Johnny's got to go," she said. "Get goin'. This guy has started by now. Slim, you, Flynn an' Doc, take the car an' get off at once. You'll do it by tomorrow morning. If this guy's got there first, get rid of him too. This ain't goin' to be a picnic, so don't ball it up. Don't forget, once the news leaks out we shall be on the run. The snatch business will come to the surface again. So watch your step."

The three men bundled out of the room and rushed down the stairs into the alley. They climbed into the Airflow, and with a screeching of rubber the car shot away from the kerb.

Rocco, leaning against the wall of the alley, watched them go with mild interest. He stood there in the sunshine, picking his teeth thoughtfully with a little wooden pick. His tight suit was pressed, and his trousers, too short in the leg, revealed brilliant white socks. A bowler hat perched on the top of his

head. Rocco was funny to look at, but he was mean right through.

He wondered idly why three of the gang had left in such a hurry. He glanced at the club thoughtfully. He guessed someone was going to run into trouble. Just then Eddie came out of the club and nodded to him but didn't stop. He walked on down the street. Rocco looked after him, still chasing holes in his teeth. Eddie had a hell of a bruise on his chin, he noticed. This began to look interesting. He glanced at the clock across the way. It was just after one. Walking slowly down the street, he came to the "Tired Dog" restaurant. He pushed open the chromium-plated door and entered the cool, shadowy room. He glanced round quickly before handing in his hat. He saw the check-girl of the Paradise Club over at the far end. She was busy with a crab salad. He wandered over to her table and smiled in his thin way.

"This's a nice opportunity," he said.

She paused with a loaded fork suspended in air.

"I'll buy it," she said briefly.

"You know, Maisey, I've been waitin' a chance to stand you a meal."

Her doll face smiled happily. "You go right ahead, big boy," she said brightly, "I won't stop you."

He pulled out a chair and sat down opposite her. She continued to eat with unexpected enthusiasm. He glanced down the menu and called for cold chicken and what went with it. He had a nice line of talk with dames, and he chatted away while he ate. Maisey said little but did herself well. She had not much time for wops, but when a wop paid for anything, she was brave about it. She'd do that for anyone, so long as they paid.

"You know, big eyes," Rocco said, leaning forward with his elbows on the table, "we ought to have got acquainted long ago. Where you been hiding that beauty so long?"

She giggled. "Be your age," she told him.

"Listen," he said in a low voice. "I ain't usually attracted to a dame, but when I run into a honey like you, then I give up. Did anyone tell you you're lousy with the right stuff? When I saw you sitting here, I tipped my hat . . . this is the

gravy, I tell myself, an' this is where Rocco digs intta his savings."

Maisey looked up cooly. This talk sounded like the berries all right, she told herself.

"Could you use a couple of hundred bucks?" he asked with a thin smile.

Her blue eyes flashed open. "A couple of hundred bucks? Gee! Could I use it?" She laughed. "I'd do a lot of things for that dough."

"Come over to my apartment an' earn it," he said.

For a moment she hesitated, greed battling with sham indignation. She thought she had better show a little front. "Here, where do you get that stuff from?" she demanded. "I ain't that sort of a girl."

Rocco waved his hands. "You got me wrong," he said hastily. "I wouldn't make a raw suggestion like that. I want you to come over an' have a talk with me. I'm offerin' to buy information."

"What's the big idea?" She looked puzzled.

"Save it, save it," he said patiently. "Will you come?"

She got to her feet. "No funny business," she warned him as they left the restaurant. They climbed into a taxi that was cruising by, and Rocco talked solidly about nothing until they reached his apartment. It was small and bare, but Rocco had been advised what to buy, and his stuff was good. The furniture was light wood and the floors polished. A few rugs lay like islands on the boards. The chairs were big and overstuffed. There was a big divan in the centre of the room, covered with brightly coloured shawls.

"Nice place you got here," she said, taking off her hat and fluffing up her brittle hair. She sank into the armchair, which gave nearly to the floor. She crossed her legs, and Rocco had an eyeful from where he was sitting. He reached over to a cabinet at his elbow and poured out a couple of drinks. He added ginger ale to the rye with the care of a chemist. He came over to her and put the glass in her hand.

"You're on the inside of the Grisson mob," he said carefully, choosing his words. "Since they've been here, business

ain't so hot. I could use a little girl with brains if she could come across with some useful information. Now listen, honey, if this idea don't appeal to you just say so, an' we'll forget it. I'll play some records to you instead. I've a swell radiogram here. If you wantta pick up some bucks now and then, well, it's here for the takin'."

Maisey finished her drink and Rocco gave her another shot. He saw that the liquor was already hitting her a bit. "What do you want to know?" she asked.

Rocco smiled to himself. As easy as that, he said to himself.

"What's going on at the club?" he asked.

Maisey puffed out her rouged cheeks. The liquor was making her dizzy. "Not a lot. They make dough all right."

Rocco looked at her patiently. She was dumb, and he told himself that he'd have to take her along slowly.

"Anything phoney goin' on there?"

"Just the usual club business, with private bedrooms to let as a sideline," Maisey told him. She suddenly found it hot in the room.

"Where did the gang go this afternoon?" he asked. "I saw Slim an' two of the boys scam outta the club as if all hell was poppin'."

Maisey shrugged. She was getting bored with this. "Search me," she said, finishing her drink. "I don't know."

Rocco lost patience. "You gotta do better than that for two hundred bucks," he said evenly.

She looked at him with bleared eyes. "You're right, I ain't being a help, am I? Say, that poison's strong. I'm getting plastered."

Rocco laughed. "You're all right," he assured her; "just happy, that's all."

Maisey giggled. "I suppose you wouldn't be interested in Slim's girl-friend?"

Rocco shook his head. "Slim ain't got a girl-friend," he said; "I know that."

"Okay, smart guy." Maisey took another drink from him. "Slim ain't got a girl-friend, but let me tell you he's got some

broad locked away upstairs that he spends a load of a time with at nights."

Rocco's eyes narrowed a little. Was he getting somewhere with this dumb cluck at last? "Take a drink," he said.

She waved the glass at him, spilling some of the liquor on the polished floor. "What's the idea, getting a good girl stinko?"

"Come on," he said, giving her a cigarette and lighting it, "you can take it."

She nodded her head drunkenly. "Sure, I can take it."

"What's all this about locking some dame up?" he asked.

"I dunno who she is, but I guess Slim's hot pants for her. She's on the second floor. She goes out late with Slim for a walk. She's all wrapped up. I've never seen what she looks like. She goes out about three o'clock in the morning for an hour. Most nights she takes this walk. I've spotted her when I'm clearing up. It's after the club shuts. She just walks along beside Slim and never turns her head. Gee! I don't mind telling you that that dame gives me the jitters sometimes. She looks like a walking corpse."

Rocco thought this was interesting. It might pay to investigate this business. He got to his feet and moved round the room, thinking. Maisey watched him. He came over to her and sat on the arm of the chair.

"If I could have a look at this dame," he said quietly, "I'd give you somethin'."

Maisey became generous. "'Sall right," she said. "You keep away from your bye-bye till three o'clock and you'll see her most nights, taking her walk."

Rocco took out his wallet and thumbed out two hundred dollars in small notes. He got up and put them on the mantelpiece. Maisey watched him with interest. He looked at her and thought she was snappy on the eye, even if she was as dumb as a statue. He had nothing particular to do this afternoon.

"There's some rent for you," he said, pointing.

Maisey got to her feet unsteadily, and he took her arm. Instead of taking her to the mantelpiece he led her to the divan. She collapsed on it with a little giggle.

Fenner took some care in getting his car under cover. He manœuvred it into the heavy undergrowth and, getting out, he walked back to see if it were visible from the road. He had to fix the bushes a little before it was completely hidden. All-night driving made his head muzzy and he felt like hell. He guessed the Grisson mob would be coming up close behind him, and he had not much time. Almost he wished that he had picked up Flagherty before leaving Springfield. Two were better than one in a rough house, he told himself with a crooked smile, but time pressed. Flagherty was not at his hotel when Fenner called. He knew that Paula would get busy, and Brennan would be on his way.

Fenner was quite near Johnny's hideout, but not too near. He began to walk up the twisting path to the shack. He carried his gun in his hand. Although he guessed that Johnny would get tough, he wasn't taking chances.

As he approached the shack he moved with greater caution. He told himself that it was impossible for the Grisson mob to have arrived first, but he was on the lookout for trouble. The dawn was just breaking and the sun was coming up over the hills. It was going to be another hot day; there was a mist still hanging about the valley. This suited him because it cloaked his movements. He paused when he came to the clearing. Standing behind a broad tree-trunk, he surveyed the scene before him. Although the shack door stood open, there was no sign of Johnny. Fenner guessed he was preparing to go out with his gun to find something for the pot. He slid across the clearing at high speed and entered the shack like a shadow.

Johnny was bending over the stove, shoving some rashers around in a fry-pan. His back was to the door and he didn't notice Fenner come in. Fenner saw a shot-gun standing in a corner, but it was a good jump from Johnny, so it didn't worry him. He pushed his gun forward and called softly. Johnny shuddered as the shock penetrated, and turned slowly. His face was ghastly and twitched with terror. He turned a mottled yellow when he saw Fenner. Dave felt sorry for him. "Take it easy," he said; "don't start anythin' an' you'll be okay."

Johnny just stood there, helpless with shock. "What you

want?" he mumbled, a stream of saliva drooling from his mouth.

Fenner pointed to a chair. "Sit down," he said.

Johnny seemed glad to do so. His legs buckled, and he let himself down heavily. His twitching hands jerked about on his knees.

"Listen, Johnny; I want information," Fenner told him, his voice tense. "It's up to you to tell me straight. If I think you're lyin' I'm goin' to give you the works. Do you get that? I'm goin' to tear you apart. I ain't got much time, an' hell's goin' to pop mighty soon."

Johnny glanced wildly at the door and then back to Fenner.

"Riley and his mob came here with the Blandish girl, didn't they?" Fenner shot at him.

Johnny nodded quickly—too quickly to please Fenner. "That's right, mister," Johnny mumbled. "Sure, that's right."

"Then what?"

Johnny shifted his eyes. "I couldn't have them here, they were too hot, see, mister? I couldn't take a chance of gettin' in bad with the bulls, so I passed 'em up. Jest told them to keep goin', and they did."

"How long did they stay here?" Fenner demanded.

"Jest long enough to eat, mister, straight. They beat it in a big closed car, soon as they had fed."

Fenner scratched his head. "The same story, an' it gets me nowhere," he told himself. He thought Johnny knew a bit more, and was holding out on him. "Listen, you rummy; you know more than that. Come on, spill it, Where did they go?"

Johnny cringed. "Honest, mister, that's all I know."

Fenner hated doing it, but he had to crack this goddam case somehow. He hit Johnny right in the middle of his soft face. Johnny flopped over backwards, taking the chair with him. He crawled up on his hands and knees, whining. Fenner booted him hard as he struggled up, so that he went over again. Johnny began to squawk in a high-pitched voice. Fenner went over to him.

"What's the story?" he asked quietly. "Don't start sayin'

you don't know, or else I'll get tough. Come on, open up!"

Johnny glared up at him viciously. The mess of blood across his face made him look like a street accident. "I tell you I don't know," he snarled. "Lay off me, will you?"

Fenner jerked up the fry-pan and stood over him. "You'll talk or I'll slop this fat in your mug," he said. The grease was hissing in the pan and Johnny cringed away. That scared him more than a punch, and he began to babble when Fenner swung the pan.

"Don't start on me, mister," he whined. "Ask Grisson, he knows . . . he was there. . . ."

Fenner believed in hunches. All his life he obeyed an instinctive hunch when it came his way, no matter how foolish those hunches might be. As he was standing over Johnny he suddenly wanted to duck. He didn't look over his shoulder, he just slammed himself on the floor and rolled away from Johnny as hard as he could lick. There was a faint tinkle of glass as a pane in the window was shoved in and the black nose of a Thompson poked through. Fenner's brain raced. He was in a jam all right, and he had to get under substantial cover or else he'd be decorating a slab in the local morgue. Grisson had turned up and trouble was on the way. Close by him was an iron tank in which Johnny used to mix his horse-feed. Fenner jerked himself behind this with one swift movement, at the same time looking over at Johnny.

Johnny sat on the floor gaping at the Thompson. He just stayed there paralysed. The sudden violent clamour of the gun burst through the room, and Fenner could almost see the slugs cut into Johnny's chest. He ducked back behind the tank as the Thompson swung round to him. Once more the sharp clamour broke out. The slugs beat against the iron sides of the tank, making a noise like a rivet-gun at work. Fenner sweated behind his cover. He couldn't even pop out to have a shot back. That Thompson was pure hell. Behind him was the wall, and the tank covered him from the side. Unless they came into the room they couldn't get at him. He lay flat and waited. There was silence, accentuated far more after the violent noise. He could afford to lie low, and he wasn't going to be a

sucker and take a look round the side of the tank. He cursed himself for leaving the shack door open. He was in a sweet spot all right. Putting his ear to the boards, he listened, but he couldn't hear anything. Any moment that Thompson might come round the corner to blast hell out of him. He took a grip on his nerves and screwed himself farther against the wall. Suddenly he heard the murmur of voices outside. Then someone called: "Come on out. We know you're in there. Come on out with your hands in the air."

He grinned crookedly. "An' have a handful of slugs tossed into my guts for my trouble," he told himself. He just lay there and waited. He guessed Grisson and his mob hadn't the stomach to walk in and gun it to a finish. He began to feel better with that thought. After all, these heels were bright yellow, and if he kept his nerve there was still a chance. He groped behind him and his hand fell on an axe-shaft. He took off his hat; putting it on the end of the shaft, he moved it cautiously round the corner of the tank. The hat jerked convulsively as a stream of hot slugs tore it apart. Fenner grinned. "Glad my dome wasn't in that," he said to himself.

"Hey, you punk, come on out, or you'll get it," someone shouted at him.

He lay there as dumb as a corpse. Suddenly he heard someone laugh outside. He stiffened. Something was going to happen now, he thought. He took hold of the edge of the tank and pulled it close to the wall, so that he was wedged in tight. He heard something drop on the floor and he could just see a small, round object hit the boards near Johnny. His eyes told him that it was a pineapple at the same time as the bomb went off. His head seemed to split asunder with the noise and the blast tossed him against the wall like a doll. For a moment his brain cleared and he could see things clearly. He could see the roof of the shack above him and the dirty walls of the room, then everything began to disintegrate before his eyes. The roof began to crumble and the whole lot came crashing down on top of him.

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It was a long way to struggle out of the pit. Darkness wrapped itself round him like a rug. He'd like to take just one smack at that guy who was beating him on the head. Suddenly he opened his eyes and blinked in the sunlight. A shadowy figure was bending over him and he heard a distant voice telling him to take it easy. He shook his head and then wished he hadn't. Bright lights flashed before his eyes, and someone shoved a red-hot corkscrew through his brain. He heard himself groan. Relaxing limply, he tried to clear his brain. Things came back to him slowly and he sat up. "For Pete's sake . . ." he muttered as his brain reeled with the effort.

"How you makin' out?" someone said to him. He screwed up his eyes. A tall hick in overalls was kneeling by him. In the background hovered an elderly farmhand, gaping like a fish. He gingerly began to move his arms and legs, and sighed faintly when he found they responded.

"Give me a hand up," he said urgently, and the old man shuffled over to him and they got him under the arms. He swayed a bit when they let him stand, but he was coming back quickly. "Seen anyone about?" he jerked out.

"An auto went by with three men in her a moment ago," the tall hick told him. "We heard the bang an' came running. We started to shout an' these three beat it."

Fenner passed his hand over his sore head. "Listen, you two; I'm a police officer. These men've just knocked a guy off. I want you to lend a hand."

The word "police" worked it. The two straightened up and became attentive. They gaped, but they were willing to help.

Fenner walked stiffly back to the ruin. He poked about for a moment, then shrugged. Johnny was dead. "Where's your place?" he said, looking up at the two men. The old man pointed vaguely east.

"'Bout a couple of miles back."

"Where's the nearest 'phone?" Fenner asked.

The tall hick looked proud. "We gotta 'phone," he said.

"Okay. Come with me; I've a car over there." Fenner moved off slowly. His brain banged about inside his head. The thin wail of a police-siren made him jerk round. Coming up the

narrow lane at a furious rate was a dust-covered car. It skidded to a standstill near him and Brennan scrambled out, followed by a number of uniformed officers. The last to get out of the car was John Blandish. Fenner waved to them grimly.

"Well, I guess you boys stepped on it," he said, "but you've missed the fireworks."

"Your girl 'phoned us," Brennan said, stretching his arms and legs gingerly. "She certainly got us worked up, and we grabbed a car, and here we are."

Fenner turned to Blandish. "If my guess is right, we'll have our hands on the kidnappers very shortly."

Blandish looked at him keenly. "What's been happening?" he asked. "You look as if you've been in trouble."

Fenner grinned ruefully. "If you call a bomb-fight trouble, you're right."

"What's been goin' on round here?" Brennan demanded, looking at the shattered shack.

"Listen, Brennan; we can skip the story for a moment. There's urgent work to do. Can I use your men for a little while?"

The quick, sharp way he spoke told Brennan that something was breaking, and he nodded at once. "Sure, go ahead."

Fenner went over to him and said something in a low voice. Brennan looked at the two farmhands who were staring in the background. He went over to them and had a few words. They hesitated and then moved off. The group of men watched them until they were out of sight, then Fenner said: "I want you boys to look round this place. You're lookin' for graves—do you get that? Look for any ground that's been disturbed, and let me know. Get going; I guess you won't take long on this job."

The State troopers moved off into the undergrowth and began a concentrated hunt. Brennan and Blandish walked over to Fenner, who had sat on the running-board of the police-car.

"What's all this?" Brennan said.

"Wait," Fenner said briefly. "Maybe I'm wrong, but I'm backin' my hunch. Without a little evidence I ain't talkin'."

Brennan shrugged his shoulders and moved off after his men. Fenner looked up and caught Blandish's eye.

"You've started something, anyway," Blandish said.

Fenner nodded. "Sure," he said. "You wanted action and I've given it to you."

"I'm anxious to hear what you have been doing," Blandish said quietly, "but I can understand that you don't feel inclined to tell me until your plans have materialized. You will remember that I am an anxious man." That was all he said, but Fenner knew it meant a lot to him.

He got to his feet. "Sure," he said again, "I know how you feel. I'll say this: if those cops find what I hope they'll find, then the lid's right off this case."

Blandish took out his cigar-case and offered it to Fenner. They both smoked in silence. The trampling and rustling in the undergrowth gradually faded as the beaters moved farther into the shrub. A small bird suddenly swooped down from the cloudless blue and hopped from twig to twig on a near-by bush. Fenner watched it with interest. He suddenly realized that he was sweating violently and his mouth was dry. A lot depended on what those bulls turned up. A sudden shout made both men turn sharply.

"I guess they've found something," Fenner said quickly.

They moved with urgent expectation to the undergrowth and began forcing their way through the thick bushes towards the shout. It did not take them long to catch up with the others. They found them in a small clearing. Brennan pointed to the ground significantly. The soil had obviously been disturbed, although it had been covered with leaves and dead branches.

"We gotta get a spade," Fenner said.

"I've sent one of my men for one already," Brennan returned. "Here he is, coming now."

One of the troopers peeled off his coat and took the spade. The others grouped round, watching. It was hot work, and they all had a turn before they found what they were looking for. One of the men abruptly put the spade down and knelt beside the shallow hole they had dug. Fenner came over and

peered down. The man was scraping the soil away with his hand. A faint smell came from the hole that made Fenner's stomach turn. He saw a mop of mud-matted hair coming to light. He stood back.

"It's a corpse, all right," he said. He turned to Blandish. "Let's get outta here, we ain't got time to mess around. Brennan'll give orders to have those stiffs moved to the Springfield morgue. I gotta lot of things to talk about, an' this is urgent."

Brennan was still startled at the finding of the body, but he took things in hand. Fenner started off to the car, and Blandish followed him. Brennan soon caught them up and they drove off rapidly. Fenner sat at the wheel, his face creased in thought. Brennan leant forward. He was sitting in the back. "What is all this?" he demanded.

"Plenty," Fenner retorted. "We're gettin' back to Springfield and then we'll get together. I gotta think, so shut up an' let me do somethin' that's foreign to you."

Blandish smoked in silence. Fenner admired his nerve. He said to him in a low tone, "It's goin' to be all right," and Blandish looked at him hopelessly. Fenner told himself that the guy had given up.

Three hours later they were all seated round a table with drinks in front of them. Flagherty had joined them. Fenner looked round at each of them thoughtfully. He had given himself a bath and a fresh suit. This was his big moment.

"Now this is the way it goes," he said. He addressed Blandish the whole time. After all, he supplied the dough, so he had the best seat. "Your daughter was kidnapped by Riley and his mob who knocked off this MacGowan. They took her to Johnny's place, which was a good hideout. Johnny was used to hiding up hoodlums on the run, an' I guess he was gettin' well paid for the job. Now, somehow, an' I ain't sure how, but it don't matter, Grisson's mob got on to the kidnappin'. They made a surprise visit an' rubbed out Riley an' the other two. You've paid ransom to Grisson an' not to Riley, do you get that? Can't you see how it all fits? As soon as you paid out the dough, what happens? The Grisson mob come into

money. They peddle this hot stuff for safe dough. That'll explain why the ransom money hasn't turned up yet. Okay. These hoodlums move outta town an' start this night-club. You supplied the sawbucks for that. Are they sittin' sweet or are they? All the dicks in the world are searchin' for Riley, and they are spendin' the money. While Riley's givin' the worms their three whacks a day."

Brennan started up with an oath. He made a grab for the telephone. Fenner looked at him. "What are you startin'?" he asked.

"Why, you dumb bozo," Brennan spluttered, "you could have told me that in the car. We could have pinched that gang by now."

Fenner got out of his chair and took the 'phone away from him violently. "Will you sit down an' give me a chance to explain this thing? You dicks have got heads like stone."

Brennan scowled at him, but he sat down again.

"For one thing, we don't know if this is right, but I'm willin' to bet that it is. A smart lawyer would spring those birds as soon as we got the cuffs on them—so fast that it would make your head dizzy to see them go. What evidence have we got? Besides, I guess they have still got the girl."

Blandish started violently. For a moment there was a thick silence. Fenner turned and looked straight at him.

"Flagherty tells me that Grisson's got a room in his club that he keeps locked. He has seen him enterin' it. I may be wrong, but it looks as if your daughter's bein' held there."

Blandish got to his feet. "For Pete's sake," he shouted, completely out of control, "what are you sittin' there for? Get men and raid that place!"

Fenner took it calmly. He looked round at the excited faces of the other three. "Flagherty will also tell you," he went on evenly, "that the Paradise Club is nothin' short of a steel fort. You make a raid on that joint an' long before you get in, if you ever do, your daughter will be stiff. Listen, Blandish; I've been handlin' this my way, an' I'll continue to handle it. I understand this business an' you don't, so shut up an' sit down."

Blandish hesitated a moment, looking round the table

with feverish eyes, then he sat down. Fenner looked at him and shrugged slightly. He turned to Brennan. "You can see that, can't you?" he demanded. Brennan looked at Flagherty.

Flagherty said, "He's right, boss; that place will want a lotta crackin'."

Brennan nodded at Fenner. "Go on," he said.

Fenner took a deep breath. "First I want that place surrounded. I want cops everywhere. In the opposite buildings, on the roofs, in the street, under cover, in fact I want the whole place lousy with 'em. Grisson may try an' get the girl out."

Brennan grabbed the 'phone and, after a moment's delay, got through to headquarters; he gave his instructions rapidly.

"I want Anna Borg picked up an' taken down to headquarters, an' if you can get hold of Schultz at the same time so much the better," Fenner went on. He waited until Brennan had finished, then he continued: "This Borg dame's at the bottom of the whole thing. She's our only witness that Grisson's mob knew that Riley had snatched Miss Blandish. She's told me that Riley 'phoned her from Johnny's, and I'm wonderin' what else he told her. The question is: did she know that Grisson wiped out Riley, or did they kid her along? I'm bankin' that they kidded her, in which case she may rat on them when she hears the truth. She may be able to give us the lowdown on Miss Blandish, too. Anyway, she's important. This thing's got to be handled carefully or else your daughter's goin' to be wiped out."

Blandish got to his feet slowly. He looked utterly tired and ill. He extended his hand to Fenner. "I'm sorry I made a fool of myself," he said quietly. "You've done a fine job of work. I didn't understand——"

The telephone broke on their ears sharply. Fenner scooped it up and stood listening. "Okay," he said, and slammed the receiver on to its cradle. He turned to the others with glittering eyes. "They've dug up three bodies in that hole, an' the finger-prints match Riley's all right!" he shouted excitedly. "We're on the right track now. Let's go!"

He sprang to the door, leaving the others to follow him.

IV

Rocco fixed his hair with a small white comb. He straightened his tight-fitting suit by pulling and patting the cloth. He stood in front of the mirror and looked at himself. His tie was straightened by a flip of his hand, and then he carefully perched his bowler hat on the top of his head. He looked round his room with satisfaction before leaving. He had made sure that Maisey had left nothing behind her. Maisey, he told himself, had been an amusing interlude. She had surprised him with her enthusiasm. He liked dames to get enthusiastic.

After Maisey had gone he'd sat smoking in a relaxed position on the divan. He had smoked a number of cigarettes and he had come to certain conclusions. Slim was away. Of course he might come back that night, but then he had to take a chance. Rocco wanted to look at this mysterious jane that Slim was keeping under cover. Maisey must give him a hand there. He walked down the passage and waited for the elevator. The bell-hop jerked his fingers respectfully to his pill-box as he slid back the grill. Rocco liked these little attentions. It wasn't so long back since he was a bum himself, and he could still remember what had been handed to him by those in the money.

In the street he flagged a taxi and was driven to the Paradise Club. He passed up the stairs with a number of other guests. The place was doing a brisk trade, he thought, as he flipped his hat to Maisey. She looked at him with coy eyes. He admitted that she had her points. When she had time on her hands he came over and hung around the barrier, saying nice things to her. She took all he had and wanted more. Looking over his shoulder, he made sure that they were alone, then he said to her in a low voice, "Which room is this dame in?"

She took instant fright. "What's that to you?"

Rocco looked at her with narrowed eyes. "You mean, what's it to you, don't you, Toots?" he said softly. "The answer's another hundred bucks."

Maisey shook her head. "For gawd's sake," she said; "this's dynamite! Don't be screwy!"

Rocco nodded his sleek black head. "Okay, sister," he said; "I'm goin' upstairs to have a look around. You ain't seen a thing, an' you know nothin'."

Before she could protest, he left her and ran up the stairs. He looked over the banisters at her when he reached the top, and she stared up at him with a white, scared face. He waved his hand at her and then walked down the corridor. He went to the last door and turned the handle. It was locked all right. A thin smile lit his mouth and he fumbled in his pocket. He inserted a thin piece of steel into the lock and twisted it sharply. The lock slid back with a click and he pushed open the door. With a quick glance over his shoulder into the deserted corridor, he entered the room and shut the door behind him softly.

Miss Blandish looked at him with complete indifference. She lay on the bed, smoking a cigarette. Her long green wrap reflected with a faint sheen the light of the table-lamp. Rocco stood and gaped at her. She was a big shock to him. He told himself that she was class all right. He stood by the door and said, "I guess I got into the wrong room."

Miss Blandish reached over and mashed the cigarette into the ash-tray. "Will you go away?" she asked, closing her eyes.

Something was persistently grinding itself at the back of Rocco's brain. He found himself asking where he had seen this dame before. The more he thought about it the more he realized that her face was as familiar as the face of his favourite film star.

"Who are you, lady?" he asked cautiously.

Miss Blandish opened her eyes with an effort and shrugged helplessly. "I can't remember," she said wearily; "I don't care very much, either." Rocco slid closer to the bed. He saw the pin-point pupils. They told him plenty. Suddenly he remembered. He could see the large splash pictures in the tabloids. For the love of Mike, he thought, it's the dame who was snatched! He had got on to something all right this time.

He came nearer and looked at her intently. "Yeah," he said aloud, "I know who you are."

She opened her eyes with a start. "What are you doing here?" she asked. "You shouldn't be here; he wouldn't like it."

Rocco leant over the end of the bed. "Don't you worry your head about him," he said, "he's outta town."

"I think you had better go," she went on as if she hadn't heard him. "The old woman will hurt me if she finds you here."

Rocco came round to her and shook her shoulders gently. "Snap outta it, lady," he pleaded. "Listen to me for a moment. You're doped, do you get it? You're full of somethin' they've given you. You can't remember who you are or why you're here."

"Please don't touch me," she said. "I wish you would go away; I want to sleep."

"Your name's Blandish," Rocco said, keeping his voice low, and speaking close to her. "Your father's John Blandish. You were kidnapped nearly four months ago, an' the cops and your poppa have been huntin' for you. Now, ain't that right? Ain't your name Blandish?"

She looked at him with dazed, blank eyes. "Blandish?" she repeated. "That's not my name."

Rocco stood back and scratched his head. He was sure that this was the Blandish dame, but what could he do to get behind that blank wall? His brain raced. He could see a pile of jack in this for himself. If he could get this girl out and hand her over to Blandish there would be a lot of dough coming his way. A nice backhand slap at Grisson, too. There were risks, of course, but it had to be a gamble. He made up his mind quickly. He'd take the risks.

Sitting on the bed, he jerked Miss Blandish to a sitting position. She sat facing him, her face dazed and her eyes like great holes in a mask. "Your name's Blandish," he repeated, speaking in a hard, low voice. "You've been kidnapped. Ain't that the way it goes?"

She shut her eyes and tried to remember, but the heavy clouds that wrapped her brain were immovable.

He gave up with a grunt of disappointment. "Okay, sleep

it off," he said, pushing her back on to the pillow. "I'll be back." He turned to the door and left the room.

Maisey was almost hysterical when he demanded his hat.

"My gawd!" she said. "I've been steaming myself. What do you think you're doin'?"

Rocco deliberately put his hat on his head and straightened his coat. "I've been wastin' my time," he said with a thin smile, "an' been wastin' my dough too." He slid a small roll over to Maisey, who grabbed at it with a nervous hand.

"Well," she said with a relieved smile, "you ain't mean."

Ma Grisson walked out of the restaurant and paused when she saw Rocco. Rocco lifted his hat high above his head. He liked to show that he knew his manners. "'Evenin', Ma," he said. "Just been tellin' Maisey what a swell looker she is."

Ma stood looking at them. Her large face was blank.

"Don't go gettin' my girls into trouble," was all she said. They watched her plod up the stairs, and Rocco blotted his face with a silk handkerchief. He had judged his time close, he thought.

Maisey was watching the old woman with terrified eyes. Rocco gave her a sharp slap on her flank. "Be yourself," he said; "there ain't nothin' to get scared about."

Maisey jerked her eyes away from the stairs. "Don't go pullin' any more fast ones," she implored him. Rocco gave her his thin smile which said nothing. He walked out of the club and went over to the "Tired Dog". He sat down at a small table and took out his watch. It was nearly ten o'clock. He ordered a bottle of wine, and sent the boy for an evening paper. He placed his bowler on the seat beside him and carefully filled his glass with the sour red wine. He pressed his shoulders against the back of the chair and stretched. Maisey had tired him a little, he found. Yeah, if he got out of the business all right he'd see some more of Maisey. He took the paper from the boy and gave him a nickel. "Save it, son," he said, looking at the headlines. "Money comes hard these days."

The boy looked at the nickel and sniffed. "You're telling me," he said.

Ma Grisson stood squarely on her great feet and stared down at Miss Blandish as she lay on the bed. She had entered silently and had not disturbed the sleeper. She stood there, thinking of Slim. She tried to put herself in Slim's thin body, vainly trying to imagine how he must feel towards this girl, so heavy in sleep. Ma Grisson knew the danger of keeping her, but she knew also what it meant to Slim. She wondered how long it would last. Not only how long Slim would want to fool around with her, but how long it would be before someone got wise to her being there.

She shrugged her massive shoulders. As soon as he tired of her she must be got rid of, she told herself. She hoped that it would be soon. Even her iron nerves were bending under the constant reminder that here was evidence that would get them all fried sooner or later. She glanced at the small wrist-watch absurdly out of place on her great arm. It was nearly three o'clock. She turned to the door and plodded downstairs again. The club was deserted now. Maisey was putting her hat and coat on, gaping with weariness.

Ma paused near her. "You gotta be careful of the wop," she said. "He ain't in love with us, an' he'd like to make trouble."

Maisey started nervously. "Sure," she muttered. "I don't encourage him."

Ma looked at her hard with her little glittering eyes. "Well, I've told you. He's poison to dames."

Maisey struggled into her coat and nodded good night. She was glad to get away from the old woman. She gave her the jitters. Ma watched her go and then went into the restaurant. The place was deserted except for Woppy, who dozed in a chair. She shook him roughly.

"You gotta take the Blandish girl for her run," she said. "I'm gettin' her ready, so get goin'."

Woppy protested violently. "Aw, nuts!" he grumbled. "I'm beat. Can't she skip her walk for tonight? Slim'll be back tomorrow."

Ma jerked her head. "Get goin'. Slim wants her to go, so if you don't like it you can argue it out with him."

Woppy got to his feet, cursing softly under his breath.

"Keep her off the main streets an' walk her fast. You're not to stop for anyone. Take your rod an' watch out for trouble," Ma told him. "This walkin' business ain't no picnic, so watch out."

"Eddie oughtta do it," Woppy grumbled.

"Eddie's gone home with Anna," Ma said. "Get goin' an' shut your mouth." She went upstairs again and shook Miss Blandish roughly. "Come on," she said. "Come on, you're takin' a walk."

Miss Blandish started up hurriedly, her face twitching with nerves. She climbed out of the bed unsteadily and took off her wrap. She dressed herself mechanically while Ma stood and watched her. The drug was not holding her so much, and every time Ma made a move Miss Blandish felt her flesh cringe. She tried to brace her muscles, but it made no difference, she cringed just the same. Her body felt an independent being to her. She could do nothing about it. She took the dress Ma thrust at her and stood hesitating. She was frightened to put it over her head, because she would not be able to watch Ma for that short time. She hated to take her eyes off Ma for one moment.

"Get goin'," Ma said in a hard voice.

Miss Blandish made a small circle of the dress and raised her arms so that she could pull it quickly over her head. She scrambled into the dress with feverish haste. Ma said nothing. She gave her a black, light coat, and the hat that went with it had a thick, spotted veil.

"Woppy's takin' you," she said, throwing each word at Miss Blandish slowly and deliberately. "You gotta behave. Don't you start anythin' or I'll come after you an' you'll get hurt."

Miss Blandish nodded her head. Her bones felt liquid inside her. She had no resistance left in her. They walked down the stairs, Ma keeping a large hand on her arm. Woppy was smoking in the hall. A black fedora was pulled over his face. He glanced at them as they came down, and scowled.

Ma took Miss Blandish up to him and shook her arm

roughly. "Walk fast," she said, "and keep your eyes straight. If Woppy has any trouble with you I'll get tough."

Woppy took her elbow in a hard grasp. "Come on," he said. They walked into the street. Woppy glanced up and down, but the street was dimly lit and empty. They began to walk rapidly. Woppy hated his job. He was nervous and, besides, he could do with some sleep.

He kept one hand on his rod, tucked in his trousers' waistband. The other hand held Miss Blandish's elbow so that he could control her. She walked along beside him. The night air was sweet to her, but not once did she think of breaking away. Her brain was still clogged with the drugs she had been given; and Ma scared her.

Across the road, from a dark alley, Rocco watched them go past. He swung a short length of lead piping in his hand. He recognized Woppy and was glad to see that Slim hadn't come back yet. Woppy would be easy, he told himself. He let them get well up the road, then he slipped after them. Woppy walked round the block, keeping to the side-roads. He glanced over his shoulder from time to time, but the road seemed deserted. At the far end of the street he could see a cop standing under the standard lamp, and he turned abruptly down an alley, jerking Miss Blandish with him.

Rocco broke into a spring. This alley would do. He came up quickly and silently. Woppy heard him when it was too late. He let go of Miss Blandish and swung round just as Rocco hit him. The blackjack bounced on his head. Woppy folded at the knees. He fell on his hands, his black hat wedged into his skull. Rocco hit him again. He hit hard, drawing his arm well back and slamming down as if he were breaking a rock with a hammer. Woppy made no sound. The lead pipe bounced, stinging Rocco's hand. There was no need to hit again. The black hat began to fill with blood.

Miss Blandish stood against the dark wall, motionless. Her mouth was open, but she made no sound. Rocco tossed the pipe away. He stepped over Woppy carefully and took her arm.

"You remember me?" he whispered to her. She didn't

know him. "I'm taking you back to your father," he went on. Still she stood there, stiff and frozen. He took her arm and pulled her from the wall. "Walk!" he said sharply. "I gotta car at the end of the block."

She still hung back. "Come on, come on," he said, losing patience.

She began to struggle feebly, pulling her arm from his hand. He tightened his grip. "Can't you understand that I'm gettin' you outta a jam?" he said.

"Let me alone," she said. "I must get back. The old woman will do things to me."

"Forget the old woman," Rocco said. "You're goin' a long way from her." He began to force her down the alley. She resisted for a moment, then gave up. He reached the main street. His car was parked in a shadow. He could see a cop examining the plates. He cursed quietly. He wanted the cops out of this. If he turned this jane over to them they would take the credit and frame something on him. Maybe they'd even try and pin the snatch on him. He ducked back into the alley again, pulling Miss Blandish with him. The cop didn't seem to be in a hurry. He put his foot on the running-board and took off his cap. Rocco stood in the shadow, watching. Miss Blandish stood shivering behind him. The cop looked up and down the street, then put his cap on. Rocco watched him move off. Still he waited; then, when the cop had turned the corner, he took Miss Blandish to the car. He pushed her into the front seat and got under the wheel.

She began to beat her hands together, but he took no notice. He drove fast and heaved a sigh when he ran into the underground garage. The place was deserted. A small light burned in the ceiling, but the attendant had gone home.

Miss Blandish began to cry. Rocco forced her out of the car. He found himself sweating slightly. This was not going to be a soft job, he told himself. He led her to the elevator and slid back the grill.

Only when he had shut the door of his apartment did he relax. He took her into his room and snapped on the lights. She just stood there helplessly, her body jerking with nerves.

"Get your hat an' coat off," he said sharply.

She did nothing. He stepped up to her and jerked her hat off. Unbuttoning her coat, he took that off, too.

She let him lead her over to the divan. He went to the door and locked it, then he turned to the kitchen. He made a quantity of black coffee, very strong. He made a lot of it. When he got back she was sitting on the divan, her hands, palms up, folded in her lap. She was crying weakly. He gave her a large cup of the coffee and forced her to drink it; he gave her another cup after that. He told himself that he had got to wake her brain up somehow.

She stopped crying after a bit, and he sat down beside her. "Get a grip on yourself, lady," he said urgently.

"What am I going to do?" she asked.

"Now, listen," he went on. "You gotta get your brain workin'. You've been doped—do you get that? You gotta try an' snap outta it."

She sat there, listening to him talk. He went on and on, drumming at her; waiting patiently for some sign of recognition to filter through. She tried to understand, feeling the clouds moving from her brain, seeing dim pictures of a nightmare gradually forming before her eyes. He went on and on, making a guess here and there, saying her name over and over again. He saw that he was making headway. She was beginning to get somewhere. He got up and dug about in a drawer. He gave her a number of old newspapers he had collected, carrying the story of her kidnapping in large black type. She stared at them with awakening interest.

He was limp with excitement when he finally asked her for her telephone number; and he grabbed at the telephone when she gave him the number in a far-away, terror-ridden voice.

The Airflow screeched to a standstill outside the Paradise Club. Its black body was covered with a film of white dust, and the wings were caked with mud.

Slim climbed out stiffly, followed by Flynn. Doc nodded to them and shoved the gear in. The two men paused for a moment, watching the Airflow shoot over to the garage, then they turned to the alley.

The time was just after eight o'clock, and the sun was bright and not too warm. Slim wiped his sleeve across his face. All-night driving could be tough, he thought, as he knocked on the door. The doorman looked swollen with sleep, standing there blinking in the sunlight. Slim pushed by him and walked up the stairs.

Ma was standing by the barrier. There was a frightened, brittle tension in her face that Slim hadn't seen before. He look up at her and paused. One of his feet was on a higher stair than the other. His long, thin hand held the rail. He just stopped and looked. Ma stood there, her eyes shrinking as if she saw her death in him. His hand tightened on the rail so that his knuckles went white.

"The girl's skipped," Ma said.

Slim didn't advance his lower foot, but put his raised foot back and stood firmly on the one stair. He took his hand slowly off the rail and groped for his gun. Ma remained like a vast, misshapen statue.

"Go on," he jerked out.

"Woppy took her out an' they ain't come back."

Flynn watched them from the hall. Slim took a step forward, then stopped again. A white circle appeared round his mouth and spread to his nostrils.

"What've you done?" he asked softly. His hand had found the gun and he drew it slowly from its holster. His yellow eyes were gleaming.

"What can I do?" she answered, not moving any part of herself but her mouth. "The cops've got her by now."

"You old cow," Slim said, "you've framed this . . . you've killed her, haven't you?"

"Woppy took her out an' they ain't come back," Ma repeated. "Use your head . . . can't you think of something?" She knew that she had to turn his mind quickly or else he'd shoot her.

His eyes wavered. Flynn broke the tension by calling nervously, "I'll get Doc."

Slim lowered the gun. "She's been gone about four hours?" he asked.

Ma nodded.

"The bulls would have been here by now if they'd got her," Slim went on. He walked up the stairs unsteadily and leant against the wall. The shock was beginning to hit him. "Get your brain workin'," he said; "there's more in this than the cops."

Ma said: "Last night Rocco was here. I saw him slip a roll of dough to Maisey."

Slim stiffened. "Rocco?" he said. "That heel would like to put one across us." He stood there looking down at his dust-covered shoes. His slack mouth hung open.

Doc and Flynn came in with a rush. Doc was shaking all over. "She gone?" he quavered. "This finishes it!"

Slim turned on him. "Rocco was here last night pushing dough to Maisey," he said. "I guess we'll have a little chat with that judy right now."

Ma relaxed. She had been expecting a lot of trouble from Slim. "You an' Flynn get hold of her," she said, taking command, "an' Doc can go out an' see if there's any news breakin' yet."

Slim ran downstairs with Flynn at his heels. Doc looked helplessly at Ma. "Listen," he said urgently; "let's get out before something starts that we can't handle."

Ma reached out a hand and shook him by his coat front. "Get going," she said. "We're all in this, an' we gotta keep our nerve. The bulls ain't here yet, an' it looks to me that Rocco's at the bottom of this."

Doc jerked himself away and went down into the street.

Slim let himself into Maisey's apartment with a pick. He trod softly. Flynn waited outside, shivering with nerves. He gripped his gun-butt until his hand ached. He was ready to shoot his shadow.

Maisey lay in her small bed, sleeping heavily. Her pouting mouth was open and she snored softly into the bedclothes. Slim shuffled into the room and stood looking at her. His

yellow eyes gleamed in the dim room. He put his cold hand on her throat and squeezed. Maisey woke with a jerk. Her scream was throttled back.

"I want to talk to you," Slim said between his teeth. "Come on, wake up."

Maisey lay flat on her back, staring up into his twisted face. She was like a rabbit looking at a snake.

"Why did Rocco give you that dough last night?"

Maisey shook her head. He relaxed his grip slightly.

"Rocco didn't give me any dough," she whimpered.

Slim hit her across her face with his open hand. "Why did Rocco give you that dough?" he repeated.

She squirmed under his grip, her hands trying to pull her throat clear. He pinned her down and she could only thrash with her legs. He hit her twice. Her nose began to bleed and the blood ran on to his hand.

"All right, all right," she gasped. "He gave me the dough because he made me."

Slim showed his teeth, his face twisted in hate. "You can't pull that one," he snarled at her. "I know your sort. You want cash down for that sorta thing. Come on, spill it!"

"Honest, it's true," she whined.

He groped behind him and got hold of her stockings that were hanging over the bedrail. He dug one of them into her mouth and wound the other round her face to keep the gag in place. He moved with deliberate swiftness. Jerking off the bedclothes, he rolled her over, twisting her hands behind her. She struggled, but she was powerless in his hands. He knotted his handkerchief round her wrists, then he straightened up.

"You're comin' clean," he told her, "so get that straight."

Flynn, outside, paced up and down. He kept jerking out his large silver watch and staring at the face with unseeing eyes. He felt the sweat oozing through his hatband. Slim was a long time, he kept telling himself. He listened outside the door, his ear to the wooden panel, but he could hear nothing. He turned the handle, and looked into the room. What he saw made him jerk his head back, and he began to swear softly. Slim came out. "Rocco's got her all right," he said. "I'm goin' right over

to his place. Listen, Flynn; this broad knows too much an' she talks. You gotta get rid of her. You're takin' her for a one-way ride. Take her out into the country. We don't want the bulls nosing round the club—get goin'."

Flynn watched him run down the stairs, then he walked into Maisey's room. She was lying on the bed, groaning through her gag. Her arms were scarred with little red circles where Slim had burnt her with a cigarette. Flynn jerked her to her feet. "Come on, sister," he said, "get a grip on yourself. You're in bad with Slim, but he's goin' to give you a break." He untied her wrists.

Maisey sat on the bed, holding her arms and shuddering.

"Get goin', sister," Flynn said. "Get some clothes on. I've got to take you to see Ma."

"I ain't goin'," Maisey sobbed. "They'll do for me."

Flynn grinned. "Don't kid yourself," he said. "They want to get the girl back, that's all. If the bulls do get on to her trail all of us'll be on the run. Ma ain't goin' to take a chance on you. We don't want you to be left behind. That's sense, ain't it?"

Maisey looked at him suspiciously. "Well, I ain't goin'," she said at last.

Flynn pulled his gun. "If you don't come along," he said quietly, "I guess I'll have to do something about it."

Maisey hurriedly got to her feet. "Okay," she said nervously; "I'll come."

"Get goin'," Flynn repeated, sitting on the bed.

She dressed hurriedly under his cold gaze. Something told her that she wouldn't see her room again, and by the time she had pulled on her hat she was trembling and in a state of collapse. He had to support her down the stairs. He hurried her across the pavement into the car without attracting attention. She sat beside him, shivering and jerking. He looked casually down the street and then over his shoulder through the rear window. There was a group of men some way off, coming towards him, but otherwise the street was clear. He glanced at her quickly, then he pointed to the roof of the car. "What do you make of that?" he asked coldly. As she looked up he

hit her on the point of the chin and eased her on to the floorboards as she slumped forward. He started the engine as the group of men drew past him, and swung the car towards the open country.

Rocco slammed the receiver back on its cradle. He had wasted an hour trying to locate John Blandish. He wouldn't admit it, but he was getting bothered. He looked over at Miss Blandish, sitting on the divan. What a sweet help she was! She was still turning over the newspapers, reading and re-reading the lurid story. Her hands were trembling so violently that she had to tuck them under her thighs and leave the tabloid spread out before her on the rug. Her head jerked constantly, and she gave Rocco the jitters.

"Listen, lady," he pleaded. "I wantta help you—can't you get that? What am I to do? Your poppa's somewhere. I've rung round every lousy number they've given me, but I can't find him. Can't you think of something?"

Miss Blandish didn't seem to hear him. She put the tabloid away from her as if it were suddenly unclean, and sat there looking at her feet. Rocco came over to her and patted her arm.

"For cryin' out loud . . ." he began.

She shied away from him. "Let me alone," she said fiercely.

"All right, all right, lady," he soothed. "Don't get jumpy. I wish you'd help yourself. I gotta find your poppa, ain't I?"

She looked at him. "No, no!" she said loudly, beating on her knees with her clenched fists.

Rocco was bewildered. "Don't you want to get outta this?" he demanded. "Don't you want to see your poppa?"

Miss Blandish began to sob. She shook her head miserably. "Leave me alone," she said, swaying from side to side as if she were in pain. "Leave me alone."

Rocco tore at his hair. "I gotta do somethin'," he shouted at her. "I'll have that mob around here if I don't do somethin'."

She sprang to her feet and ran to the door. She tugged and

wrenched at the handle. "Open it!" she cried shrilly. "Open it! I want to get away!"

Rocco dragged her away as she began to drum on the panels with her fists. "Take it easy," he said desperately. She twisted from him and sprang back to the door. He began to swear as he dragged her away again and forced her on to the divan. She opened her mouth to scream, but he slammed his hand across her mouth. He felt her teeth trying to nip the heel of his hand and he pinched her face, digging his fingers into her cheeks.

"Stop it," he said. "Stop it, do you hear?"

She relaxed a little and lay slack. He shifted his grip so that he held her lightly.

"You're driving me screwy," he said. "I wantta help you an' this is the way you take it. What's biting you?"

She lay there trembling, her eyes roving round the room.

"I'm goin' to get the bulls," Rocco said suddenly. "I've wasted enough time already."

"No!" She began to struggle again. "You're not to!"

"Aw, shut up!" Rocco snarled. He shoved her back hard and left her. He picked up the telephone again, watching her closely. She came at him with a rush, just as he began to dial the number. He shoved her away with a lunge of his body. She lost her balance and went over hard on the floor. Her hand went to the cable.

"Leave it alone!" he shouted. "Take your hand off it! . . . Hell! I'll sock you in a minute." She wrenched at the cable, throwing the whole of her weight backwards. The cable came away from the wall as the number connected. The line went dead. Rocco glared at her and threw the useless instrument on the floor.

"You dope!" he said.

She scrambled away from him. Her face was white and terrified.

He shouted: "You must be nuts! I'm gettin' outta here . . . you can go to blazes. . . . Grisson'll come here, you little fool. He won't start a kissin'-party either. . . . You've sunk yourself."

"You must stay here until he comes," she said.

"Why, you—you . . ." Words failed Rocco. He went spluttering over to the door. "Come on, come on, before it's too late." He paused by the door. "You don't want him to find you here an' take you back, do you?"

She nodded helplessly. "Yes," she sobbed; "I can't do anything else. He must come . . . you don't understand. . . . I can't see my father again . . . not after what's happened. I can't see anyone ever again. . . ." She began to weep, rocking herself to and fro.

Rocco came over to her. The sweat glistened on his olive skin. "Snap out of it," he said roughly. "You'll be all right. For Pete's sake, what's all the mystery about? Why can't you see your old man again? Don't talk nuts! Come on!" He jerked at her arm, but she twisted away fiercely. Rocco cursed her with exasperation. "Have it your own way," he said. "I'm through. You give me a pain. I'm gettin' outta here."

She ran over to the door and stood against it. Her eyes glittered madly at him. "You're to stay here," she told him. "He's got to find you here."

"Like hell." Rocco came at her furiously. She slipped him when he made a grab at her and stood in the centre of the room. He fumbled for the key and shoved it into the lock.

Miss Blandish suddenly swept up a light chair and hit him on the back to the head. Rocco stumbled, dizzy under the blow. She swung at him again, but he got away from the door. He held his head in both his hands, trying to force the bright light out of his eyes. She had the key now. He could see her dimly and staggered over to her. She twisted lightly past him. He saw her toss the key through the open window; he suddenly felt frightened. Sitting down abruptly on the divan, he held his head in his hands. She got as far away from him as she could, leaning against the wall, moaning to herself.

"I'll kill you for that," he said evenly, "you screwy little dope!"

The clock on the mantelpiece struck eight sharply. Rocco felt the sweat break out all over him. He was caught all right, he told himself desperately. He pulled his gun and snapped

open the magazine. He looked over at Miss Blandish and then shrugged helplessly. She was nuts, he told himself. He got to his feet and looked out of the window. Far below he could see the traffic moving like toys, and he turned away abruptly. He was in a spot all right.

If he got someone to bust in the door, this screwy dame might rat on him and even pin the snatch on to him. She was nutty enough for anything. If he didn't get out, Slim would be along. Anyway, Slim would have a job getting in, and if he did, Rocco would make sure of getting the first shot in. He walked to the door and carefully examined the lock. He knew it was hopeless, he had had that lock fitted himself, and it was a tricky one. He turned back to the divan.

"Well, you certainly pulled a sweet one this time," he said. "I want to get this straight. If I shoot this lock off, we're goin' to have company. This block's full of nosy guys, an' they'll beetle around as soon as I start poppin'. Okay; what are you goin' to tell 'em when they do?"

"I don't want to see anyone," was all she said.

"For Pete's sake, can't you leave off playin' Garbo an' come down to earth?" he said impatiently. "I tell you I gotta get outta here. Suppose Slim don't arrive, you goin' to stay here all your life?"

"He'll come," she said.

Rocco got to his feet and walked over to her. She shrank away from him. "I want to find out just how nutty you are," he said, keeping his voice steady with an effort. "You know who you are, don't you?" She nodded her head. "You know Grisson kidnapped you?" Again she nodded. "You know you've been doped?"

She looked at him helplessly and her face crumpled a little. She began to cry. "All right," he said impatiently, "cut it out. It won't help you any. You been doped an' it has made you a bit nutty; only a bit, but you don't know what you want. Now I've got you away from Grisson an' want to take you back to your poppa. That's a good thing, ain't it? Your old man's goin' to get a mighty big kick outta gettin' you back, an' things are goin' to be jake for you again. When we get

company, I want you to tell them how I helped you. Do you get all that?"

Over his shoulder she saw that the kitchen door was opening silently. Her eyes dilated. The door went on opening. Slim was caked with sweat; he had come up inch by inch in the box elevator. His yellow eyes were half-closed.

"Do you get that?" Rocco repeated. He didn't give a damn now. He knew that Slim was behind him, but he couldn't turn. He knew that he was dying fast, but he just couldn't do anything about it. He looked at Miss Blandish, seeing her beauty, seeing her blank, terrified eyes. He wondered what would have been his end if he had not started this. Why had he bothered with her? he asked himself. He had known the risks and had accepted them. He didn't want to die. Not the way Slim would kill him. He had seen Slim's knife before. The muscles of his loins suddenly contracted. He couldn't do anything about that either. It came unexpectedly and as a relief. He felt his muscles relaxing to it, and then the steel blade wiped out everything.

Eddie lay on top of the bed, his pyjama coat open down to his waist. A cigarette dangled from his mouth. He listened to Anna as she stormed about the room. His complete indifference was rapidly coming to an end. Anna was a swell kid when she liked to be, but when she threw a temper she was not so hot.

In her red pyjamas, her hair wild, she stood at the foot of the bed and ranted at him. Eddie tightened his mouth and watched her with half-closed eyes.

"And, what's more," she told him shrilly, "it's time we got out of here. This burg'll drive me screwy. Where do you think it's getting me? Do you think I want to put on a cheap strip every night of my life? . . . Not likely! I'm going to make a success in my life, do you hear? I'm not going to hang around with your small-time mob collecting rent that would make the poor-relief look like a banquet. You bet your socks I'm not.

And you can take it from me that I'm not standing for any more cheap cracks from that long slob you go places with. . . ."

Eddie sourly told her to pipe down. "Sweet suffering Pete," he growled, "can't you give me a rest? Sure, you'll be in the lights one of these days. All you can-dancers think the same. The world is full of judies who show everything they've got. . . . What happens to 'em?"

Anna beat on the bedrail with her fist. "All right, smart guy, if that's the way you feel. I can get along very well playing solo. You can take your little mob and you can stick them on the wall one after the other. I'm through."

Eddie climbed off the bed lazily. "You're gettin' too big for your pants," he said evenly. "I guess you want somethin' to cool you off."

"You big sap!" Anna shouted at him. "Do you think I'm scared of you? Some chance! You're just a dime a dozen, and that goes for 'em all. Riley had more ideas than you ever thought of."

Eddie laughed. He thought that was funny. "Sure," he said, standing over her. "Where's he now?"

"In the dough," Anna snarled at him. "Where you'll never be."

Eddie laughed again. It would tickle this dame if she knew just how deep Riley had been planted. "Come off it, baby," he said. "Forget it. We're always fighting these days."

"Well, ask yourself why?" Anna said impatiently. "This always happens to me. I find a guy who looks good, acts good, but he's never *near* me. When I try to tell you anything my words sort of bounce back at me. Do you wonder I get mad?"

Eddie lifted his shoulders. "All right, so I'm listening. Say your piece, baby, maybe you'll feel less like poison ivy when you're through."

Anna faced him. "Look, Eddie, you don't know anything about me, do you? You just like my face and the way I'm made. You never look beyond that, do you?"

Eddie frowned. This stuff meant nothing to him. "I don't want X-ray eyes when I look at a dame. They're complicated enough on the surface."

"That's the kind of crack I'd expect from you," Anna said, sitting on the bed wearily. "No one's interested in *me*. They're interested in the thing that covers me. Suppose I was ugly, Eddie? You wouldn't look at me twice. But it'd be *me* just the same."

"Where do you get all this stuff?" Eddie demanded. "You've got it in the right places, so why should I worry?"

Anna swung round. "I'm scared of getting old, Eddie. I'm scared of getting wrinkles. I want to be someone before that happens—don't you understand? That's all I've got—and it's getting older every minute. I want to make enough dough so I can snap my fingers at men—and I'll do it, Eddie, if it means leaving you."

A sudden wave of depression hit Eddie. He went over to her. "Sure, I know how you feel," he said. "I get that way myself. Sometimes I think it'd be swell to be out of this racket. No risks, some dough in my pocket and the road to the south under my feet. Well, maybe some day——"

Anna flared up. "Some day! It's always some day. You ain't got the guts to do anything about it. You'll be a small-time hick for the rest of your days."

Eddie looked at her. He was getting tired of this. "So I'm a small-time hick, am I?" he said angrily.

"You know you are. You're just a gutless piece of baloney. You just sit around, talking big and doing nothing. I guess I'd better quit, Eddie. It's the only way."

Eddie shrugged. "Go ahead if you want to," he said indifferently. "There's plenty of floozies who'd like your job. It's soft enough."

She turned like a wild-cat. "You calling me a floozie?" she screamed at him.

"Naw," he said with heavy sarcasm. "Who said you were a floozie?"

She swung back her hand and smacked him across the face, bruising his lips. Eddie's eyes gleamed. He liked a fight, and this judy had certainly asked for one. He walked over to his clothes lying in a heap on a chair. He carefully withdrew his belt from the loops, letting his trousers slide on to the floor.

"Okay, Toots," he said evenly; "this is where you get yours."

She rushed at him, scratching and kicking, but he swept her arms away and tossed her on to the bed. Before she could scramble up, he slashed at her with the belt, making her squeal. He aimed another blow at her, but she rolled off and crouched down by the side of the bed. His hand dropped to his side. He felt suddenly bored with her. What the hell! he thought. I used to get a kick out of fighting her: and now he felt it was stale. He tossed the belt away and vaulted over the bed. He landed on top of her before she could get clear. His weight knocked her flat. Scooping her up, he ran with her into the bathroom. He slammed her into the empty bath hard. She saved her head by an unconscious forward movement, but she didn't save anything else. He jerked the shower-cord and stepped back, letting the ice-water hit her with force.

"That'll cool you," he said, breathing hard, and he left her floundering in the bath. After locking the door, he dressed hurriedly, listening with indifference to her storming. She hammered on the panels and screamed names at him. When he was ready for the street he took the key from the lock and shoved it under the door to her. Then he left the apartment at a run.

When Anna bounced into the room she found that he had gone. She stood there, quivering with rage and making puddles on the floor. She tore off her pyjamas and went back to the bathroom for a towel. Her eyes glittered and she dressed herself furiously. She told herself that she was through with him for good. She would pull her freight right away. She went from drawer to drawer, pulling her things out savagely, tossing her clothes into two suitcases she had dragged from under the bed. She opened her handbag and glanced inside it. The roll of greenbacks gave her some satisfaction.

She told herself that Pete would be glad to have her back. Pete had got ideas all right, he didn't let the grass grow. She slammed down the lid of one of the suitcases and knelt on it, snapping the locks to. The doorbell shrilled, and she got up impatiently. For a moment she hesitated, then she shrugged

and walked out of the room. She jerked the front door open. Brennan and two other men were standing there. She stiffened. They had cops written all over them.

"Hello, Anna," Brennan said with his big smile. "We want a little talk with you."

She made as if to slam the door, but Brennan eased his way in, followed by his boys.

"What do you want?" she demanded angrily. "You've got nothing on me."

"Of course we haven't." Brennan seemed quite shocked. "Headquarters want to ask you a few questions: just routine . . . ain't anything in it."

Anna put her hands on her hips. "Well, tell 'em to take a pill. I'm busy!"

"Don't be awkward, Anna," Brennan pleaded. "We've got a car outside, an' we shan't keep you long."

"I tell you I can't come," Anna snapped.

Brennan glanced at the other two and jerked his head to her bedroom. One of them drew a gun and walked into the room. He was expecting to find Eddie there. He came out again. "Pullin' out," he said briefly; "luggage an' all."

Brennan lifted his hat and settled it over his eyes. "Goin' away?" he asked mildly.

"Getting the weekly wash ready," Anna told him.

Brennan folded his fat hand on her arm. "Come on," he said. "We want to be nice to you."

She hesitated a moment, then shrugged. "Okay, okay!" she said impatiently. "But make it snappy."

They went down in the lift in a body and the lift-boy kept looking at them. He didn't say anything, but stared the whole time. Anna asked him if he knew who his father was, and he was glad when she walked out of the lift. One of the bulls winked at him. "Nice, ain't she?" he said. The lift-boy said she was a bitch.

Anna sat in the car and sulked. Brennan talked the whole time. He just talked airily about the latest ball games, but she didn't answer him. Once she looked at him, and Brennan

smiled; but the cold dislike did not melt from her face, and Brennan was quite glad when the ride was over.

They walked her into a large room. Fenner was sitting, smoking. He waved a hand to Anna. She stopped in the middle of the room, her eyes like granite.

"Hyah, baby?" Fenner said easily. "Told you I'd be secin' more of you."

She whipped round on Brennan. "What's all this?" she demanded. "Who's this guy?"

Brennan smiled some more. He was just one big host. "Take a chair," he said. "Make yourself at home."

She sat down, her hands gripping her bag.

"Nice of you to come," Fenner said. "I won't keep you long. I want to tell you a little story which'll interest you."

"What *is* this?" she wanted to know, but they just sat there looking pleased with themselves.

"I'm goin' to give it to you straight," Fenner said. "We're investigating the Blandish kidnappin'. Your boy-friend Riley started off by puttin' the snatch on this girl. You know about that part, so I'll skip over it. What you don't know is that Grisson heard about it an' thought it too good to miss. He thought that Riley was too small for a rake-off like that, so he muscled in and took the girl from under Riley's nose.

"Your new boy-friend Eddie and the rest of the mob were in on this. What happened to Riley? You've been wondering about Riley ever since he faded out of the picture. You told yourself that he had taken a run-out powder on you. You thought he had gone nuts for this Blandish girl. You got so steamed-up that you threw your cards in with Grisson's crowd; while all the time Grisson had the girl an' was makin' a monkey out of you. Wasn't that a laugh for Eddie?"

Anna sat still. Her brain was racing. "So what?" she managed to say. "Suppose this is the McCoy, what do you hope to get out of it?"

Fenner looked over to Brennan. He jerked his head at the small door on the right of the room. Brennan nodded.

"Take Miss Borg to see the exhibits," he said to the officer who was standing near the door.

"This way, miss," said the cop with a grin.

"Where do you get that stuff?" Anna demanded suspiciously. "I don't want to see anything. What is it, anyway?" She had gone suddenly pale as a thought went through her mind.

Fenner leant back in his chair. "Go along, sister," he said. "We've found somethin' that'll interest you. Take a look an' then come on back . . . we'll wait."

"What have you found?" She was getting jittery. Her breath came fast.

Fenner smiled at her. "Ain't nothin' for you to get scared about," he said. "Go an' have a look."

She went with the officer slowly, dragging her feet. Fenner glanced over at Brennan. "It'll work all right," he said. They sat there waiting. Suddenly they heard her scream. One short, disgusted scream. They didn't move. Fenner played with a pencil. This had got to be handled carefully.

She came stumbling back, her face contorted with horror. He came over to her fast. "Take it easy," he said, leading her to a chair. She sat there shuddering for a moment then she looked up.

"You dirty heel!" she said.

Fenner kept his eyes on her. "Sorry for that," he said. "They ain't pretty, are they?"

She put her hands over her face. He thought she was going to be sick, but she controlled herself.

"Yeah," he said, leaning forward. "Grisson knifed Riley to get that girl, and buried him out at Johnny's. He was gettin' the breaks all right. Five hundred grand and the snatch pinned to a dead man. A sweet set-up for Grisson, I must say. And you chuckin' yourself at Eddie. A sucker, if there was one. What a laugh for Eddie! Every time he tumbled you he was laughing at you. They had the girl, they had the ransom, and Eddie had you. You didn't even see any of that dough, did you? You bet your sweet life you didn't. You didn't know that Eddie had a hundred grand for his split. A hundred grand would've looked swell sittin' in your lap. All you got was a tumble every night and a snigger from Eddie.

"All right: here's your chance to get a smack at those rats. We wantta get into that steel fort of theirs without a battle, an' you can tell us how to do it. We want to know if that Blandish girl's in there, an' you can find that out for us too. We want to get her out alive if she's in there. We gotta spring it on those birds so fast that they won't have time to pull a gun. You come across with that an' you even things up with them. You get out of this business with a clean sheet an' pick up a grand for bein' a good girl."

Anna sat there, her face dead-white and her eyes glittering wildly. She kept muttering to herself over and over again. Fenner let her work herself up.

"The lousy, double-crossin' heels!" she said suddenly. "I'll fix 'em all right, but I ain't fixing them through you. I ain't squealed to a cop yet, an' I ain't starting now."

Fenner sat on the desk close to her. "You can't do a thing on your own without runnin' a risk of gettin' rubbed out. Why take that chance? You can get goin' with a thousand bucks an' you can have a big laugh when we fry those guys. Think; they've got that girl in there, an' I guess you would hate to be in her place with Grisson and Eddie foolin' around."

She looked at them sullenly but said nothing.

Fenner tried again. "Come on, Toots," he said. "Use your head. This'll be a nice break for you. Now, listen—this's what we want to know. How can we get into that joint without a battle? Is there any way round it? You can tell us that and then you'll be in the clear."

"You cheap bulls can go to hell," was all she said. Fenner glanced over at Brennan. Time was pressing, and this was getting them nowhere. He went over to Brennan and, taking his arm, led him away from Anna.

"I can crack this dame," he said in a low voice. "Haul your boys off an' give me a few moments with her alone."

Brennan looked puzzled. "What's the idea?" he asked.

Fenner tapped him on the chest. "Get the boys outta here and skip. This is urgent. Let me handle this."

Brennan said okay, and went over to the door. He jerked his head to the others and they followed him out of the room.

Fenner stood looking at Anna. She sat in the chair indifferently. Her face was obstinate and hard, but Fenner knew he had her where he wanted her, and he could afford to grin.

"Riley's been dead over four months," he said, speaking rapidly and low. "Just get the dates right. A month ago there was a murder committed at the Palace Hotel. You remember Heinie was shot there and Riley had the shooting pushed on to him. Riley couldn't have done the shooting. The bullet came from a small-calibre gun, the type of rod a woman would use. You were on the same floor as Heinie. Didn't Heinie squeal on your boy-friend? Okay; add that up an' tell me the answer."

Anna was watchful now. Her eyes shifted to the floor. "You're crazy," she said.

"Maybe," Fenner went on. "The cops haven't given this angle any thought yet, but I have. Either you play ball with me or else I'm goin' to remind Brennan about Heinie's shootin'. I want you to get this clear. It's sweet fanny to me what happened to Heinie. That little rat's nothin' to me. I want the Blandish girl. Give me what I want an' I shan't say anythin' about the shootin'. Brennan may get on to it himself, in which case you're goin' to have a thin time beatin' the rap, but Brennan's mighty busy at the moment, an' I don't think he'll come round to that angle for a time. Anyway, it'll give you a chance of skipping with the grand that Blandish'll pay you. Now, what's it to be?"

She thought for a moment. "What do you want me to do?" she asked.

Fenner breathed a faint sigh. Things were going the right way after all. "I want you to go straight down to the club an' find out if the girl's there or not. I'm comin' with you and I'll wait outside. We must know if she's there. We can't go bombing that joint regardless unless we know where she is. Now, will you do that?"

"How can I?" she demanded. "They've got her under cover now, an' it's not likely that they'll let me stick my nose around."

Fenner got to his feet. "You'll find a way," he said grimly.

"That's your part of the bargain. This is urgent, so let's step on it."

They left the room together. Brennan was hanging about in the outer office. Fenner didn't stop, but he gave him a wink as he passed him. Brennan watched them leave the office and then scratched his head. "What's that guy up to now?" he asked himself.

Fenner let Anna go on alone when they reached the street. Before she left him, he said: "Now, understand, you gotta be quick. Go in an' find out, then meet me at the corner in double-quick time. Rush it, sister!"

She had to knock several times before the doorman slid back the small trap. He hesitated before opening the door, then did so grudgingly. Anna went straight up the stairs. She ran into Ma, who was coming out of the deserted restaurant. Ma stopped short when she saw her, and her face hardened. "What the hell do you want?" she demanded impatiently.

Anna was startled. She hadn't seen Ma look so mean before. "Eddie an' I had a fight," she said, speaking casually. "I thought I'd better see if he'd come in here. Has he?"

Ma shook her head. "Scram outta it," she said. "He ain't here. I'm busy." She turned back to the office. Just then Doc came blundering up the stairs. His face was white and glistening with sweat. Anna stared at him, but he didn't even see her. He went straight into the office on Ma's heels and shut the door. Anna stood still. What was going on around here, she asked herself.

The atmosphere was tense and charged with dynamite. She hesitated, wondering what to do next. She had the place to herself for a moment. Turning quickly, she ran up the stairs. When she reached the top landing her breath was coming fast. She paused and looked over the rail into the reception hall. Ma and Doc were still in the office. She continued down the corridor until she reached the last room. The locked door had never interested her. She had accepted Eddie's explanation that it was a storeroom without any thought. The door stood half-open and she looked into the room. She stood looking round and her face hardened.

So it was on the level, she thought. This was obviously where they had kept the girl. Somehow they had taken her out of the club. Her eyes narrowed. Fenner should know this. She'd take his offer and skip. The lousy, double-crossing swine! She turned on her heel and sped down the corridor again. At the head of the staircase she stopped short. Ma was standing in the hall, looking up. Anna felt herself flinch. Ma's face was stolid, but her little eyes had a murderous gleam.

"I thought I told you to get outta here?" Ma said.

"I was looking for Eddie," Anna stammered. She tried to get a grip on herself. She began walking down the stairs, without taking her eyes off Ma. She got half-way down and then her nerve went back on her. She stopped. "I tell you I was looking for Eddie," she quavered.

Doc came out of the office and joined Ma. They both watched her. "Where are you goin' now?" Ma asked.

Doc suddenly touched Ma's arm. "She knows," he said in a low voice.

Anna heard him, and she lost her head. "I don't know anything," she stammered. "What are you talking about?"

Ma said, "You're goin' to stay right here."

Anna nodded. "Sure," she said, "I'll stay."

Outside, Fenner waited impatiently. As the minutes went by he got more and more worked up. Something had gone wrong, he told himself. Anna had either crossed him or else she had over-played her hand. He stood there waiting and then decided to start something himself. He slid back into his car and rapidly drove off to Anna's apartment.

Miss Blandish watched Rocco fold slowly to the floor. She put her knuckles into her mouth, forcing her mouth wide open. She leant against the wall, biting her knuckles because she couldn't scream and because she wanted to. Rocco had fallen on his knees, his hands spread on the polished floor. He remained like that for a moment, then he slid further down, his

hands opening slowly as if he were swimming. He stretched out on the boards, rubbing the skin off his nose.

Slim stood over him, watching indifferently. He held the stained knife at his side, dangling loosely from his fingers. He stared for quite a long while, then he looked at Miss Blandish. She cringed away, trying to work her body into the wall.

"You're comin' back with me," he said.

She turned her head away, so that she couldn't see Rocco lying there. He didn't bleed at all. She couldn't understand why. She wanted to tell him to get up. He looked absurd lying there. But she knew that it wouldn't make any difference if she had told him to get up. Slim wiped the knife on Rocco's coat. The bloodstain spoilt the look of the suit. Slim went over to the window and looked down into the street.

The traffic was getting heavy, and people were moving in the street. Time was getting on, and the streets would be dangerous. He thought for a moment, then looked at Rocco. Rocco was a little guy; neat and narrow. Slim went over to the wardrobe. He pulled out a dark suit and tossed it on the bed. He rummaged in some drawers and found a shirt.

"Get into those," he said to Miss Blandish.

Miss Blandish shook her head. "Please . . ." she began.

Slim walked over to her. "Do it!" he said, his eyes hating her.

She began to take off her dress. He just stood there watching. "Go on," he said. She picked up the shirt. Then, suddenly, he moved slowly towards her. He took the shirt out of her paralysed hands. His mouth pursed, pushing his wet lips forward, and his eyes went blind.

A large bluebottle settled on the bloodstain on Rocco's coat. It stretched its legs and buzzed excitedly. It remained there some time, enjoying itself.

Eddie bought himself a big breakfast. All the time he was eating he thought about Anna. He kept telling himself that she could go to hell, but at the back of his mind he wanted her to stay. He had got used to her, and she was swell when she felt

that way. He pushed his plate away impatiently and gave himself a cigarette. He told himself that he had better look the boys up. He wished that Slim would get rid of Miss Blandish. With that dame popping around anything might happen.

He picked his teeth thoughtfully. Perhaps it would be safer to slide while the going was good. Perhaps Anna's beef was justified. Eddie believed in a woman's instinct. Maybe Anna had a hunch. He got slowly to his feet, pushing the chair away with the back of his legs. He jerked his finger to the waitress, who gave him his check. She wrote laboriously. He paid and walked out into the street. He stood hesitating in the sunshine. He couldn't make up his mind whether to go back to Anna or to go on to the club. He had a hunch to see Anna, and he flagged a taxi. His hunch was urgent.

He stood waiting for the elevator to come from the top floor. The boy slid back the grating and looked surprised to see him again.

"Ain't no use goin' up," he said to Eddie, "they've pinched her."

Eddie asked him what he was talking about.

The boy waved his hands excitedly. "Sure," he said; "ten minutes after you'd gone the bulls arrived. They took her off in a car."

Eddie stood motionless. His mouth twitched nervously. His hunch had been right. "Get this," he said quickly. "I ain't been back, do you understand?"

The boy grinned as Eddie stripped off some notes from his roll. "Sure," he said; "you ain't been back."

Eddie turned hurriedly to the door again. He looked into the street. He saw nothing to arouse his suspicions. He thought for a moment, his brain racing. Grisson ought to know about this. Anna, in the mood he had left her, was unreliable. He stepped across to the 'phone booth. He dialled hurriedly.

"Hang up," Fenner said behind him, "and keep your hands still."

Eddie dropped the receiver back on to its cradle. He looked over his shoulder. Fenner was quite close. He had a gun in his hand and he looked tough.

"I want you," Fenner said, speaking low.

The boy leant out of the elevator, watching with round eyes. This was a big day for him. Eddie stepped out of the booth with his hands raised above his hips.

"You ain't got nothin' on me, copper," he said.

Fenner said, "I'm clairvoyant; if we ain't got anything on you now, we soon will."

Two uniformed policemen stepped out from behind the booth where they had been waiting. They hustled Eddie into the waiting car. Eddie sat trembling. What had happened? he asked himself. He dug into his pocket and found a cigarette. He put it in his lips, but one of the coppers smacked it with his open hand. Eddie snarled at him. "Tough, eh?" he said.

The copper grinned at him. "You bet," he said.

They hurried him into Brennan's office when they reached headquarters. Brennan was pacing up and down, smoking a cigar. He was looking savage, and Eddie's mouth went dry. The bastards had got him all right. He stood in the middle of the room, looking at each man in turn out of the corners of his eyes. He twiddled with his hat held in his hands.

Brennan went over to sit behind the desk.

"We're on to you, Schultz," he said abruptly. "Come on, get it off your chest."

Eddie shrugged, but his knees began to knock. "You ain't got a thing on me," he said. "What's the charge?"

Brennan said, "We're holding you for kidnapping John Blandish's daughter, and for the murder of Riley, Bailey and Macton."

Eddie held himself in. Jeeze! The lid had blown right off this time. "You're screwy," he said. "You can't make that stick."

Fenner walked slowly over to him. "Ain't it right that you rubbed out Riley to get the girl?"

Eddie looked round wildly. "I tell you you're screwy," he shouted. Fenner hit Eddie across the nose. It hurt, but Eddie had taken a smack or two. He reeled back on his heels.

"You ain't goin' to do this to me!" he shouted. "I want my

mouthpiece! I gotta right to have him, an' I gonna use that right!"

"You ain't goin' to get outta it as soft as that," Brennan told him, behind a cloud of smoke. "You are going to spill all you know before you get outside help. We're used to handling rats like you, an' we ain't taking chances with one of your crook lawyers."

Eddie whirled on Fenner. "Who're you?" he snarled.

Fenner grinned. "We're doin' the questioning now," he said. "Just open your trap when we tell you."

Brennan put his thumb on the bell-push and kept it there. Three uniformed policemen eased their way into the room. They were big, tough-looking birds with large red faces and thick necks. They crowded round Eddie.

"This guy thinks he's tough," Brennan said, his elbows on the desk. "Take him away and talk to him."

The men grinned at each other. "Come on, bozo," they said to Eddie.

For a moment Eddie showed fight. He clenched and unclenched his fists. He saw that they were hoping that he'd start something. One of them had a night-stick in his hand, the thong tight round his wrist.

"Pass it up," Eddie said. "I don't know a thing."

"Get going," Brennan said impatiently.

They pushed Eddie to the door. He went with them, and Fenner brought up the rear. Fenner was getting worried. Time was moving fast, and there was still a lot to do.

They took Eddie into a small, sound-proof room. There was a massive chair in the centre which was fixed to the floor with iron bolts. To Eddie it looked like the hot-squat. Leather straps hung from the arms and legs.

"Sit down," Fenner said, leaning against the wall.

Eddie drew away. "You go to hell," he said. "You can't push me around, I tell you."

One of the cops hit him across the knees with his night-stick, and Eddie fell forward. Another of them booted him from behind. They grabbed him while the pain gripped him and slammed him into the chair. They worked fast, fixing his

arms and legs with the straps. Then they hauled off. Eddie snarled at them. His knees gave him plenty. Fenner stood over him.

"Who killed Riley?" he asked.

Eddie spat at him. "I tell you . . ." he began.

They jerked his head back by his hair, and one of them hit him across his bared throat with a club. He hit him very hard. Eddie suddenly stiffened, straining at the straps. The chair creaked with his movements. He jerked and pulled while he fought to get the air into his lungs. His face was blue with his effort, and for a moment Fenner thought he wouldn't make it. They stood back and watched him have his convulsions. Gradually the air got back into his lungs again and he ceased to thrash.

"Who killed Riley?" Fenner shouted at him. "Come on, you rat, spill it, or you're goin' to get it again."

They wound thick fingers in his hair, forcing his head back once more, dragging at the roots so that his head felt on fire. Back went his head, inch by inch, and he fought them with his neck muscles until his eyes stood out in his face. When his chin pointed to the ceiling they hit him again. He thought they had killed him this time. His throat closed up and his lungs screamed at him. He snapped one of the straps as he strained to get free, but they hit him on the wrist with the club, so that his arm went dead. He didn't know that they had hit him, he just felt his arm fall to his side, and the frantic commands from his brain for his arm to go to his throat didn't amount to anything. Again they hauled off, waiting for him to come back.

"Who killed Riley?" Fenner droned.

"I don't know . . ." Eddie moaned. "You got me wrong, mister. Gimme a break, can't you?"

They hit him across the knee-caps twice with the club. Each time hauling off and swinging down hard. Eddie bit his bottom lip through, but he didn't say anything. Fenner turned sour. "Quit playin' with him, can't you?" he said to the cops. "This guy's tough, ain't he? Well, get tough too."

One of the cops peeled off his uniform. Eddie watched him with terror in his eyes. He knew he was going to crack. He

couldn't stand any more of this. They would go on until he did split. He clenched his sound hand and strained on the strap. The pain from his knees and throat nearly drove him crazy. "You can't do this to me . . ." he wailed. "I ain't goin' to be framed."

He saw the cop coming at him with a raised club, and he tried to duck his head away, but a blinding light burst before his eyes.

Fenner watched them work on him for a long time, then Eddie slumped in the chair. One of the cops caught up a pail of ice-water and tossed it in his face. The shock of the water brought him back again, and Fenner signed to them to stand back.

"Who killed Riley?" he demanded, leaning over the shuddering man.

"Slim did it . . ." Eddie moaned faintly. "Slim wiped 'em all out. . . ."

"Where's the girl?"

"Slim's got her . . . he had her all the time at the club. . . . Don't touch me any more . . . leave me alone. . . ."

Fenner whirled round. "Shove him away," he said. "We've got to get goin'."

He burst into Brennan's office. Brennan was getting fidgety. He looked up hopefully as Fenner came in.

"Slim's got the girl at the club," Fenner said swiftly. "We know where we are . . . we ain't gotta minute to waste now. Get your boys and let's go."

Brennan slid open his drawer and took out a gun. He glanced at it and then shoved it into his hip pocket. He left the office at a run. Fenner could hear him shouting orders in the squad-room, and he went after him fast.

Slim lowered Miss Blandish to the street level in the box-lift. It was tricky work, but he was desperate. He slid down after her and jerked her roughly out of the cramped space. Rocco's suit was on the big side, but it hid her figure. Her

thick hair was tucked up under a black fedora which Slim had pulled over her eyes. She walked a little drunkenly. Slim had given her a long shot of raw liquor. She looked odd enough, and Slim was jumpy. He kept his hand on his gun-butt. He thought she would do, huddled in the car, but she was not so hot walking for anyone to see. They would tumble that she was a dame unless they were pretty dumb. The Airflow stood at the end of the alley, and he took her arm.

"I'm going to open the door for you," he said.

She didn't say anything.

"As soon as I've opened the door you come quickly. Get into the car an' don't stop on your way."

He left her and crossed the pavement. He got in the car and started the engine. Leaning forward, he swung the off-door open. Miss Blandish ran across, holding her head down. He had shoved the gear in before she had reached him, and as she tumbled in the car he shot away. He looked into his driving-mirror, but the street was quiet. There was an old woman who was looking after them, but she didn't count. He told Miss Blandish to sit low.

The Airflow shot on towards the club. Suddenly he slammed on the brakes and slowed down. The air was violently split by police-sirens. He saw five cars overtaking him, loaded with police. He drew to the side of the kerb, slowing the car down to twenty. His gun was out and he began to curse softly. The police-cars swept past him. They were heading for the Paradise Club.

He followed cautiously behind, telling himself that they weren't after him. As he got nearer he suddenly realized with alarm that they were pulling up outside the club. He swung the Airflow to a side-turning. He heard a sudden shout and saw a speed-cop on a motor-cycle coming after him. The street was busy, so, still swearing softly, he drew in to the side of the road and stopped. He leant against the side of the car, hiding his gun with his body. The cop came up with a rush. He stuck his red Irish face into the car.

"What's your hurry?" he demanded.

Slim kept Miss Blandish hidden by his body.

"I ain't in no hurry," he said. "I thought I'd get out of the way of your speed boys. . . . Makin' a raid or somethin'?"

The cop said, "Come outta that."

Slim's eyes turned yellow. He shoved in his clutch. The cop jerked open the door. "Come on out."

Slim let him have it low down. The gun roared with a savage explosion. The cop buckled, holding his belly with his two gauntleted hands. The gloves turned red. Slim sent the Airflow leaping forward. The people in the street began shouting, but none of them moved. They had seen street shootings before, and they knew it was safer to sit tight.

Fenner was just bundling out of his car when the cop was shot. The noise made him jerk his head. He saw the Airflow tearing down the street, scattering the other traffic. He hesitated, but he knew his job was to get the girl out of the club alive. He ran over to the trooper, but he was dead. Brennan joined him. "Who the hell did that?" he asked.

Three motor-cycle police had ridden after the Airflow. They could hear their noisy exhausts dying in the distance. Fenner shrugged. "It was one of the rats," he said uneasily. "I hope they don't let him get away."

Brennan was looking worried.

"My men can't get into the club," he said.

Fenner cursed. "We've got a sweet job on our hands now," he said. "I guess the girl ain't got much chance."

Brennan said: "She'll have to take what's comin'. We gotta get into that place, an' we gotta get tough doing it."

More police began to arrive, and a fire-engine came clanging up. The street became congested with a gaping crowd. The police were pushing the people back. They cleared a large space in front of the club.

At the first sign of the raid heavy steel shutters were hastily swung across the windows of the club. An enterprising trooper tossed a gas-bomb, but the shutter had already swung to, and the bomb burst in the street, adding to the confusion.

Fenner came running over to Brennan. "Give me some boys," he said. "I guess we might hack our way through the roof."

Brennan nodded. "Yeah," he said, "that's a good idea. You can get on the roof from the next building. You make a start there and I'll get some other men to kick up a row in the front."

He gave orders in a fog-horn voice, and a number of the police ran up the alley and began battering on the steel panels with their clubs. They made a big uproar, but it didn't get them anywhere. Fenner watched them for a moment, then he darted off with four policemen close on his heels. As they ran across the empty space before the club someone opened up with a Tommy-gun. The slugs scattered at their feet. One of the cops gave a howl and his legs doubled up under him. Fenner raced forward until he was out of range. The gun fired again, smacking more slugs into the cop as he lay there. From behind the police-vans the cops began firing. The sharp clatter of the Thompsons and the heavy impact of the slugs as they flattened against the steel were an added uproar to the shouts of the excited crowd and the wail of sirens as more police arrived.

Next door to the Paradise Club was the Hotel Lexham, a tall, narrow building, overtopping the club by a couple of floors. Fenner raced up the stairs of the hotel. Police were standing about the hall, with drawn guns, grimly watching. He pelted breathlessly until he reached the attics. The others came panting behind him. He shot the skylight back and scrambled on to the roof. Below them was the roof of the Paradise Club. Fenner swung his legs over the parapet and took grip on the stack-pipe. He went down with a rush, skinning his hands and tearing his trousers at the knee. The others followed more slowly. They could hear the hammering on the front door, and the spasmodic firing of the machine-guns.

The police attacked the roof with crowbars, wrenching off the tiles and revealing the rafters. It didn't take them long to hack a hole in the plaster, and one after the other they dropped into a small, dark room.

Fenner pulled his gun. "This ain't goin' to be a picnic," he said. He turned to one of the cops. "Get back the way you came an' tell the boys that we're in. Send some more up here, pronto."

He waited long enough to see the man swing himself out through the hole in the roof, then he gently turned the handle of the door and stepped into the passage. He stood there listening. On the next floor he could hear someone swearing obscenely. He hesitated for a moment, holding his gun steady. Two of the officers behind him had sub-machine-guns clutched tightly to their chests and the other one had a gas-gun.

Fenner crept down the passage to the head of the stairs. He began going down, feeling the sweat start under his arms. Suddenly Flynn came thundering round the corner. He saw Fenner just as Fenner shot at him. Flynn threw his arms about his head with a dramatic gesture, just like a singer reaching for a high note. He went over backwards with a choking shout. Fenner shot him again. He took the rest of the stairs with a jump. He was off balance when Doc appeared from a door down the passage, but he managed to throw himself on his face as Doc fired. The two police on the stairs let Doc have it with two bursts from their guns. Doc just managed to scramble back under cover, and the slugs ripped the woodwork of the door.

"Take it easy," Fenner gasped from the floor. "These rats will fight to the finish now."

Doc had slammed the door to and now he began to pump lead through the panels so that they could not get near. The police replied with a terrific burst of fire, riddling the door from top to bottom. They heard Doc give a sudden scream and Fenner thrust the door open with his foot. They found Doc slumped in a corner, the blood running in a thick stream from his mouth. He looked at them with glazed eyes and tried to raise his gun, but the effort was too much for him. The gun slipped out of his hand and fell with a little thud on the floor beside him. His eyes suddenly rolled up.

Fenner said, "Number Two."

They backed out of the room and stood hesitating in the passage. "Go through the rooms," Fenner said. "We gotta find that girl."

They walked slowly down the passage, pausing at each door. It was nervy work, and Fenner was glad when it was

over. The last door in the row he knew must have been Miss Blandish's room, but it was empty. "They kept her here," he said, "but she's skipped!"

They headed for the stairs once more. "This is where we meet the rest of the birds," one of the cops said uneasily. "I ain't lookin' forward to shakin' hands with the old woman."

Fenner grinned. "It's up to you to get your slugs in first," he said, moving cautiously down the stairs.

Ma Grisson watched them come from behind the cloakroom barrier. She held a Thompson in her huge hands, and her little eyes glittered like glass. Her heavy face was twisted in a snarl. She was going to give as much as she got.

Fenner saw a slight movement from the barrier when he reached the half-way line on the stairs. It was only because his eyes were sharp that he saw it. The thin tube of the Thompson came slowly over the counter-top. He gave a yell and threw himself down the stairs, falling with a crash on his hands and knees. He heard the Thompson clatter, and the police, for a moment paralysed by his shout, were caught in the open.

Fenner, rolling against the barrier, saw the three officers crumpling up under the stream of slugs. One of them tried to scramble back up the stairs, but he was caught by a fresh burst. Fenner put his hand against the wall and felt cold steel. He drew his lips off his teeth. That was sweet, he told himself. The old woman on one side of the barrier and he on the other. He guessed he'd have to lie there until someone came and gave him a hand.

"Listen, honey," he called; "I've gotta gun an' I know how to use it, so take it easy. You can't get me before I get you, an' I guess that goes for me too. Why don't you be a good girl an' toss the gun over an' take it quietly?"

Ma cursed him. Fenner lay still on his back watching the top of the barrier. He held his gun ready.

"Come on," he coaxed. "Pack up, an' take what's comin' to you."

Ma gently shifted the gun from the barrier. She moved her bulk inch by inch until she was standing. Fenner was lying so close to the barrier that she could not see him. She eased her-

self against the wall. Fenner caught a glimpse of her in the opposite mirror. She saw him at the same time. They stared at each other in the mirror. Both of them were unable to shoot and they just watched each other's reflections for the next move.

"Like the movies, ain't it?" Fenner said from the floor.

Ma's face twisted again. "I'll get you, you punk," she said.

"Well, don't stand there all night, get goin' if you want to," Fenner said.

Brennan, from the top of the stairs, watched them. Ma was right in the open now, she had eyes only for Fenner. Brennan raised his gun, but the slight movement caught Ma's attention. She whipped up the Tommy-gun and fired burst after burst. Brennan only just got himself under cover as the slugs churned up the wood of the stairs.

Fenner took a chance and slid quickly along the floor, watching Ma, who had forgotten him for the moment. He made the restaurant on his belly, and when he turned the corner he scrambled to his feet. The room was in darkness and he wondered if Slim were hiding there. He had to risk that, but he felt his nerves crawling up his spine. He heard Brennan swopping shots with Ma, and he left them at it.

He groped for the light-switch, and suddenly the restaurant sprang into view. The place was deserted. He walked with great care into Ma's office. Standing in the doorway, he thought for a moment that his quest was over. A girl lay on the floor, her head hidden by the desk. Then he realized that it was Anna. She had been dead some time. Someone had shot her at close quarters. He glanced round the office and swore to himself. Slim and Miss Blandish had skipped somehow.

Suddenly there was a terrific burst of firing in the hall, then silence. He heard Brennan give a shout. He stepped cautiously back to the entrance and looked round the corner. Brennan was running downstairs.

"She's done for!" he shouted. "I caught her when her slugs gave out!"

Fenner lifted his hands helplessly. "The girl ain't in the building," he said wearily. "There ain't a sign of Slim, either."

Brennan was shouting orders to his men to search the place, but Fenner knew that it was a waste of time. "I tell you she ain't here," he said impatiently. "I went through all the rooms upstairs, an' I've looked down here. There's nowhere else they could have hidden her."

"Well, they're in the open now," Brennan said. "I'll get back to headquarters and put out a general call. We'll pick 'em up quick enough. Once these rats are out of their holes it's easy to run 'em down."

Fenner went with him into the street. The crowds were still gaping with excitement. Brennan was surrounded by a mob of urgent press men as soon as he stepped into the street.

"Okay, boys," he said impatiently. "Don't hold me up now, come on down to headquarters and you'll get the story. The girl and Grisson ain't there." He didn't stop while he spoke, but elbowed his way to his car, followed closely by Fenner.

At headquarters they found the desk-sergeant steamed-up. "The boys have located Slim," he said excitedly. "He's heading for Pine Valley as fast as he can lick. All the roads are being watched, but they ain't picked him up yet."

A speed-cop, his face cut and his uniform ragged, sat nursing an aching wrist. He got to his feet when Brennan glanced at him.

"It was Slim who killed Murphy just before the raid," he said. "We followed him for several miles, but that car of his certainly can move. I had a blow-out an' took a toss, but got on to headquarters and warned them where he was heading."

Brennan nodded shortly. He took Fenner's arm and led him into the office. Fenner said to the speed-cop, "Was he alone?"

The cop shook his head. "He had another little guy with him."

"It wasn't the girl?"

"Not unless she'd got dressed in men's clothes. I never got near enough to see."

Brennan stood impatiently in his office doorway. "It looks as if it were going to be played out on the home ground."

"Well, come on, come on," Fenner said savagely. "What the hell are we going to do now?"

During the first mad rush out of town Miss Blandish crouched down in her seat, staring ahead but seeing nothing.

Slim gripped the wheel with both hands, pushing the Airflow forward, ruthlessly driving other traffic to the kerb. His loose mouth hung vacantly and his skin glistened with sweat. He could hear the wailing sirens behind him, but he did not once look into the driving-mirror. The open country was ahead of him, and if he could once make that he guessed his speed would put him in the clear. The Airflow had plenty under its hood. He spun the wheel suddenly, ripping round a corner. He felt the off-wheels rise, then thud back. He did not ease down the speed.

Another car suddenly appeared from a side-turning, but he kept on, roaring past the startled driver, missing him by inches. He was leaving town rapidly. At the end of the street the traffic lights were in operation. The red light had just flicked on. Slim put his hand hard on the horn button. The horn screeched its warning, and he cut out the exhaust at the same time. The Airflow roared, thundering down on the red light.

The crossing traffic heard him coming and crowded on their brakes. One driver lost his head and kept on. Slim hit him a glancing blow, but he kept the Airflow steady. Then he was in the clear. The busy streets dropped behind him, and the broad road leading to the open was under his wheels. The sirens behind became menacing and he heard the crack of a revolver. The Airflow had been built in Chicago, and the builders had seen that it could laugh at slugs.

Slim glanced in his mirror. There were two speed-cops behind him, both leaning over the bars of their motor-cycles, one of them shooting. He kept his pedal on the boards. They couldn't overtake him at that speed. He guessed that they were flat out as it was. Suddenly he heard a sharp noise, and he grinned. One of the cops had a blow-out. He glanced into

the mirror again. He saw, in the rapidly receding distance, one of the cyclists wobbling to a standstill. The other cop grimly kept on behind him. Slim eased his foot slightly, so that the Airflow lost speed. Up came the motor-cycle with a rush. The cop fired twice at Slim. The bullets made a cobweb of lines on the bullet-proof glass, but that was all. Slim drew his lips off his teeth and swerved suddenly, pulling his wheel to the right and then to the left.

The side of the car hit the motor-cycle and Slim almost went into a skid. He dragged on the wheel, cursing; then, as the Airflow righted, he shoved the pedal down again. The motor-cycle had swerved into a ditch and had disappeared. The road was silent now, but Slim kept his speed.

Without immediate pursuit to harass him, he could think. He glanced at Miss Blandish, but she was sitting like a statue. He was on the run now, he told himself; they had got him in the open, and it was going to be tough. He knew well enough what it meant. The girl was going to be poison from now on. Yet he didn't for a moment consider ditching her. He'd play it out to a finish.

After a few miles, he slowed down and shoved on the brake. He got out of the car stiffly, and checked his gas. He still had plenty. The first thing to do, he thought, was to switch cars. The Airflow was hot now. The bulls would be looking for it. He came round to the off-side of the car and put his head into the open window.

"We ain't goin' to be together much longer," he said to Miss Blandish, "but it's goin' to be mighty lively for you until we do get picked up."

She sat there, crushed. Words were nothing to her. She had her own nightmare that obsessed her. He didn't expect her to answer; he was used to her silences. He went round the car and got in again. He drove on at a steady sixty.

He had to drive some time before he saw what he wanted. In the distance there was a car drawn up on the side of the road. Two women were sitting on the running-board, eating from paper bags. As he came up, he saw that one of them was young and the other looked like her mother. He shoved on his

foot-brake and disengaged his clutch. The Airflow slid to a standstill. He looked the other car over with a keen eye. It was a small tourer that ran on the streets in its thousands. He climbed out of the Airflow and the two women looked at him curiously. The long road was empty and lonely. Slim didn't waste any time. He walked round the Airflow and raised the hood. He opened the toolbox on the running-board and took out an oily rag and a spanner. He loosed a plug with difficulty and wrapped it in the rag and put it in his pocket. The women still stared at him. He closed the hood and then groped for his gun. They both started up when he swung round on them.

"Get into the car," he said, opening the back door of the Airflow. "Make it snappy. This is a stick-up."

The women scrambled into the Airflow, terrified. He told Miss Blandish to get into the tourer. He had to jerk her out before she obeyed him. Again he saw how odd she looked in Rocco's suit. He looked at the younger woman.

"Take off that dress and give it to me," he said. "Come on; I ain't got all day; get goin'."

In the car she wriggled out of the dress, white with fear. He took the dress from her and tossed it to Miss Blandish. He leant into the Airflow. "Keep your mouths shut," he said. "The boys will get you, sure, if you squawk."

He got into the tourer and drove off again. Miss Blandish held the dress on her lap. Slim said, "Further on we'll stop an' you put that dress on." She said nothing.

A mile down the road he stopped again. "Get into it," he said. She took Rocco's clothes off in the car and pulled the dress over her head. It fitted her all right. Slim rolled up the discarded suit and shoved it under the back seat. He told himself that he had to switch cars again pretty soon. Those women would raise a squeal when someone passed, which might be any time. He drove into a small town and pulled up by the post-office. He said to Miss Blandish: "You stay here. I'm goin' to 'phone. You're to stay here, understand? You ain't goin' to start any funny business. It's too late for that now."

He went into the booth. No one in the place looked at him. They were small-time stuff; just village hicks. He rang Pete.

Pete was jumpy. "I can't do a thing for you," he said excitedly. "The heat's on good. The cops're all looking for you. I've had 'em in here. You're too hot for me, Slim; you know I'd give you a hand if I could. But keep out of town. They're expecting you here."

Slim hung up on him, and stood before the 'phone, cursing. He didn't know where to go. He felt suddenly trapped and he began to sweat again.

He came out into the street and then stopped suddenly. An elderly man was leaning into the tourer. He was speaking to Miss Blandish. Slim paused for a moment, then he slid his hand inside his coat. He loosened his gun. The elderly man felt him staring, and he straightened. He turned so that Slim could see him. Slim saw that he wore a sheriff's badge on his coat. The man looked dumb enough, but Slim was nervous.

"What's the matter?" Slim asked, standing there with his hand inside his coat. The sheriff glanced at him curiously. "I'm tellin' the lady that she can't park here," he said.

Slim said he didn't know that. "I'll be movin'," he said, walking to the tourer with stiff legs. The sheriff seemed burnt up with curiosity.

"What's the matter with her?" he whispered to Slim. "She nuts or somethin'?"

"Yeah," Slim said, pausing for a moment. "Don't take no notice of her . . . lost her ma, an' it's taken her that way."

Miss Blandish had hidden her face in her hands. The sheriff blew out his fat cheeks. "Got me guessin'," he said. Slim wished him to hell. "Where you headin', stranger?"

Slim told him Plattsville and got into the car. The sheriff continued to stare after them. Slim drove down the street, keeping the car steady. When he got out of the town he increased his speed. All the time he was thinking that the news had got round that he had switched cars. The bulls would be looking for this small black tourer as they had been looking for the Airflow.

Once you were on the run the heat was on good, and it stayed on. It was just a matter of time before you got caught. Slim had no illusions about that. Before they caught you you

had a chance to shoot the other guy. He would rather swap slugs than run like this. If he knew where he was going he wouldn't mind so much, but he didn't. He just felt that he had to keep moving so that he was one jump ahead of the bulls. They had him on the run now, and his brain went back on him.

The road began to mount. He was leaving the woods and getting into the hills. The mountain road twisted with sudden, sharp, hairpin bends. His foot did not relax from the pedal, and he tore up the road in second, dragging at the wheel. Half-way up, an idea struck him, and he slowed down and then stopped.

"Get out," he said to Miss Blandish. "We're goin' to walk a bit."

He leant over her and opened the off-door, then, putting his hand under her armpit, he shoved her into the road. She stood there in the sunshine, looking across at the panorama. He climbed out of the car, leaving it in the middle of the road.

Farther back, the road twisted out of sight in a sharp bend. He said, "Stay here," and walked back to the bend, so that he could see round the corner. The road was deserted. Standing on the edge of the steep hill, he could look far down into the valley. He could see the white ribbon of the road twisting like a snake as it climbed. He walked back to the tourer and, leaning through the window, released the hand-brake. Instantly the car began to run backwards fast. He had to throw himself clear, and sprawled in the white dust. He knelt in the road, watching the car as it gathered speed. Miss Blandish watched too. The car reached the bend, then its wheels ran off the road. It hovered against the white wooden posts that skirted the bend. The posts began to sag, and finally bent over like candles in the sun. The car hovered, dusty in the sunlight, then it was gone. Slim remained kneeling in the road, listening to the distant crash. He got to his feet and walked over to Miss Blandish with stiff legs.

"Come on; walk," he said.

Together they began to walk up the dusty road in the hot sun. They walked slowly and in silence. Slim kept close to her,

making her walk on the inside. When they breasted the top they both paused and looked back. The valley lay below like a green carpet patterned with unusual designs.

Slim sat on the bank, jerking Miss Blandish down beside him.

"I want you to get this straight," he said, tipping his hat. "We're goin' to jump a truck, an' you gotta keep dumb. You just gotta say nothin' and do nothin'. If you start anythin' I'll start shootin', so it's up to you. I'm gettin' out of this somehow, an' I'm takin' you with me."

Miss Blandish turned and faced him. "Why don't you kill me?" she demanded fiercely. He was startled to see the wild look in her eyes. "You can't keep this up, and you know it. Why don't you get rid of me? Do you think I want to live? I don't, I tell you."

Slim told her to pipe down, uneasily. He put his hands on her throat and squeezed. She let him; her hands on the grass beside her. He let her go and got to his feet. He pulled a short rubber stick from his hip pocket and threatened her with it. "This belonged to Ma," he said. "Remember?" Instantly the wild light went out of her eyes and she cringed back.

"No, no! Don't touch me with that!" she said, terrified.

"Another crack from you," he said savagely, "an' you'll get it." She pulled away from him, her face twisted. Her eyes were fixed on the stick, and she cringed back.

"Come on," he said, jerking her to her feet. "Watch out or I'll get tough."

They walked on. The road began to wind down and the going was easy. They let their legs do the walking, the weight of their bodies carried them down the steep hill almost at a run.

A light truck overtook them after they had reached the bottom of the hill. They heard the swish of the wheels as the truck coasted. Slim stood in the middle of the road, waving his hand. The truck stopped and the driver grinned at him. The driver was a wizened little man with a cocky, sparrow-like face, burnt brick-red with the sun and wind.

Slim wanted to know where he was going.

"Oakland," the driver told him. "You two want a lift?"

Slim nodded. "I'll give you a couple of bucks," he said briefly. "The dame's tired."

The driver opened the door. "Sure," he said. "Hop up. Where do you want to go?"

Slim said Oakland would do as well as the next. He climbed up first and sat next to the driver. Miss Blandish sat by Slim. Slim saw that his body blocked the driver's view of Miss Blandish.

"Jim O'Keik, that's me," said the driver, releasing the brake. "Just back from haulin' a load. Business is mighty bad. This's the second time I've been back empty."

The truck was light and it bounced a little on the road. Slim stared ahead and let Keik talk. Keik kept up a flow, but he noticed that Slim said nothing. "That your wife?" he asked Slim.

"What's that to you?" Slim snarled at him, his face twisting. He was getting tired of this hick's voice.

Keik looked startled and shut his mouth. They rode on in silence. Keik couldn't stay that way long. He leant forward and switched on the radio. "I put that in meself," he said proudly. "Comes in mighty handy on a long haul. I would've fallen asleep many a time without that to listen to."

The radio crackled and a thin sound came through. Someone was playing an accordion. The music sounded sad. "Ain't that swell?" Keik said. Slim said nothing.

The radio suddenly crackled once more into life. "Attention, everybody. This is important. The police are looking for Slim Grisson, believed heading for Kansas City. With him is another man, small, maybe a boy. Grisson is wanted for the kidnapping of John Blandish's daughter, and also for the triple murder of another rival gang. Was last seen driving a Ford tourer, licence number XXX42. Description of wanted man is as follows. . . ." The voice went on to give a full description of Slim. "The police think it possible that Grisson's companion is the missing girl, disguised as a man. You are warned that this man is dangerous. Do not attempt to apprehend him in any way, but report immediately to the police if

you think you've seen him. Please look out for anyone answering this description. . . ."

Slim reached forward and turned the radio off. Keik said nothing, but he suddenly lost his red colour. Slim looked at him from under his hat. "Keep going," he said.

"Sure," said Keik.

They drove on.

At one-thirty in the morning Brennan still sat in his office. A large-scale map was spread before him on the table. His hat was tilted at the back of his head, and a damp cigar, long since forgotten, gripped between his small yellow teeth. Fenner sat near him with the telephone clamped to his ear.

Brennan said, "This guy's losing his head."

A police-officer poked his head round the door. "Mr. Blandish would like a word."

Brennan looked up with an impatient scowl, but Fenner nodded to him. "Okay, shoot him in," Brennan said.

John Blandish walked in. His face was lined with exhaustion.

"Has either of you gentlemen anything to report?" he asked briefly.

Fenner hung up. "We'll have 'em by tomorrow," he said.

Brennan put a stubby finger on the map. "This guy's leaving some trail behind him," he said. Blandish leant over his shoulder, peering with short-sighted eyes at the map. "He pulled out from here with two of my boys on his heels. One of them had a blow-out. He managed to ditch the other. Mad, murderous driving. My boy was hurt bad. He went on from there to this little hick town. There he used a telephone, and the sheriff spoke to him. You know what these small-town sheriffs are; he suspected who he was, but wasn't taking any chances of a shooting-match. Before that, he held up two women, took their car and, what is more important, grabbed one of these dames' dresses. The sheriff reports there was a woman with him. We guess that must be your daughter,

"He went further on, up this mountain road here; he spills the stolen car over the side and foots it. A truck-driver reports driving him into Oakland. He left them on the other side of the town. I guess that driver is lucky to be alive. Grisson seems to be losing his taste for murder. Every road out of Oakland is being watched. There's a drag-net so thick that a fly couldn't get through it. He's bound to be picked up soon."

Blandish sat down. He passed his hand wearily across his eyes. "You've done well," he said.

Brennan shrugged his massive shoulders. "Get those rats into the open and it's easy," he said. "We're going out to Oakland right away."

"I'll go with you," Blandish said, getting to his feet.

Fenner went over to him. "It would be better for you to stay here," he said. "There's goin' to be a battle. Grisson ain't goin' to let himself be taken alive. These hoodlums always fight when they're cornered. Oakland's going to take a mighty big interest in this case, an' I guess you'll want a little quiet when you get your daughter back. I suggest you fix up rooms at some hotel here, an' wait for me to bring her back. Otherwise you're going to have the Press an' the lord knows who causin' a riot all around you."

Blandish hesitated. "I want my daughter," he said finally.

Fenner nodded understandingly. "Sure you do," he agreed. "But if you just think for a moment, you'll see what I suggest ain't a bad idea. Your daughter has had a bad time, an' we're in a better position to get her away quietly than you are. Besides, she may want an hour or so to herself before she meets her family." Fenner said this looking on the floor.

Blandish looked at him sharply. "I don't know what you mean by that," he said.

Fenner shrugged. "I don't know myself," he said shortly. "I just gotta hunch, that's all."

Blandish brooded for a moment. "Very well," he said. "You will bring her to me as quickly as possible?"

Fenner nodded. "You bet I will," he said.

Blandish hesitated, as if he wanted to say something else,

but then he turned to the door. "I am confident that you'll do the best you can," he said.

Brennan nodded impatiently. "It's in the bag." He turned an inquiring eye on Fenner when Blandish had gone. "What's on your mind?" he asked.

Fenner sat on the edge of the desk and swung his leg. "The girl's been in the hands of these thugs for four months now," he said slowly. "You've seen pictures of her, ain't you? Well, you don't want me to tell you that she is something outta the ordinary as a looker. She's got everything that makes a swell dame. You knocked around enough to know what those hoodlums have done to her in that time. That girl ain't goin' to be happy when we find her; most like she'll be a bit screwy. Ever bothered to read Grisson's record? Sure you have. Well, what do you expect from a rat like that? Did you know that he used to cut up live cats and birds with scissors when he was at school? What's he hangin' on to her for all this time? Why ain't he slit her throat an' dumped her in the drink? Ever asked yourself that? Grisson ain't had a record for goin' after women, but he's gotta start sometime. That ought to tell you something. I guess that Blandish girl's had a mean time."

Brennan swore under his breath.

"So you see I ain't goin' to be so wrong when I said that she'd like a few hours to herself before meetin' her old man."

Brennan got to his feet. "Let's go over to Oakland an' wait there," he said.

The door jerked open and a police-officer came in. He looked excited. "'Phone message just come through," he reported. "Grisson and the girl have been located at a farmhouse just outside Oakland. The farmer spotted Grisson entering one of his barns just now. He 'phoned through immediately. There ain't a doubt that it's Grisson."

Brennan began to give orders and Fenner grabbed the telephone. He called Paula.

"Listen, Paula; they've located the girl outside Oakland. Yeah! This looks like the end of the case. I want you to go over there as fast as you can. I want you to go to the Bonham

Hotel and arrange for a room on the top floor. Tell 'em I want service and no publicity. Get food and drink up there an' a lot of flowers. I'm bringing the girl there. Get goin', sister. Take an air-taxi . . . step on it."

He hung up and gathered up the map. He looked round the little office, seeing nothing, his mind busy with his thoughts. "I guess that girl would be a lot better off if she were dead," he said in his mind.

Brennan had already left the office, and Fenner followed him out at a run.

Slim woke with a start. His brain instantly cleared. His gun jerked away from its holster under his coat. He lay in the darkness, listening with straining ears.

The smell of the barn was unfamiliar to him, and in the darkness he had to think for a moment where he was. He heard a rustling in the straw, and he shifted his gun round in that direction cautiously. He lay on his side, motionless, staring into the thick darkness. A faint squeaking reassured him, and he relaxed once more on the granary floor. He became aware of a faint gnawing inside him, a strong desire for food. He turned on his small pocket-flash and swung the bright beam round the loft. Miss Blandish was curled up in the straw away from him, deep in heavy sleep. Her face was tear-stained and pale.

His bones ached from the hard floor. He was lying immediately on the trap-door that led down into the barn. There was no window in the loft; as long as he lay there no one could get in nor could she escape him without waking him. He got stiffly to his feet and pulled a truss of straw from the pile in the far corner and spread it over the trap. He lay down again, making himself comfortable. It was hot and stuffy up there, and it made him drowsy. He looked once more at Miss Blandish, then he lay back.

Dimly he began to realize that the net was settling round him, drawing him into its folds. Up to now he had been content

to keep moving just ahead of pursuit; but now he was getting scared. He knew that he could not keep this up for long. The constant need of food and the urgent necessity of a good hiding-place were becoming more and more difficult. He guessed Keik had reported to the police. That meant that they knew he was in the neighbourhood. He had walked with Miss Blandish, keeping to the side-streets, until he had put Oakland at the back of him. Exhausted, they had taken shelter for the night in the barn. The large farm had appealed to him in the darkness of the night. He told himself that he would get a car and food from the farmhouse in the morning. He vaguely wondered if they were on the telephone, and how long it would be before they reported him.

He shut his eyes impatiently from the darkness. He found that his brain was suddenly clear and full of uneasy alarm. He tried to sleep, but although his long, thin body ached for rest, his brain would not relax. He sat up again, this time savagely swearing to himself. He turned on his flash-lamp and again looked at Miss Blandish. He got to his feet and walked over to her. Turning out the light, he knelt down where she was lying. He groped for her, and slid his arms under her head. She woke with a start, trying to struggle away from him. He spoke to her, telling her to keep quiet. His hoarse voice numbed her, and she lay still, sobbing with hopeless exhaustion.

Later, sleep came to both of them again. His muffled, choking snores disturbing the rats so that they darted with alarm in the straw.

The bright sunlight coming through the warped walls of the barn woke him in the morning. He sat up quickly, listening. His mouth was dry and he was seriously hungry. Miss Blandish woke at his movement. She backed away from him miserably.

"I'm going down to talk to the farmer," he said. "You stay here an' wait. We gotta get grub somehow." He lifted the trap, and looked down into the barn. It was full of farm rubbish. He climbed down the rickety wooden ladder and walked stiffly to the double doors. He opened one of them cautiously and looked out. He could see no one.

Some distance away the farmhouse stood deserted. The

front door was closed. Slim looked for a long time, getting more and more uneasy. He dragged out his watch and glanced at it. He saw that it was a little after nine o'clock. He looked again at the closed door. He had always heard that farmers got up early. This looked phoney to him. He felt suddenly weak and frightened. He stood hesitating in the door of the barn, trying to make up his mind.

Suddenly he stiffened. Two cars were coming up the road, filled with men. He could see the flat blue caps and the sparkle of the sun on guns. He dodged back into the barn swiftly and pushed the door to. His gun leapt into his hand, and he began to shiver unconsciously. Through a chink in the wood he watched the men pile out of the cars. They began to run over in his direction. He fired without hesitation. The foremost cop fell to his knees. The others, with cool assurance of ultimate success, took cover behind various shelters offered by the farm rubbish that lay about the untidy yard.

Brennan and Fenner directed the second car-load to go round the back of the barn.

"This rat ain't got many shells," Brennan said. "On no account must you boys fire unless you get a chance at him on his own. We ain't takin' risks of ploughing the girl at this part of the case."

Fenner worked his way past the barn on his stomach. Feeling acutely aware of Slim and his gun, he was glad when he got out of range. He stood up and wiped his face with his sleeve. He knew now that this was the end of the case. It was just a matter of time. Grisson, caught in a net, must find his finish in death. The barn was completely surrounded. The police were lying secure behind their shelters, their guns pushed forward, and eager fingers on the triggers. Fenner was anxious not to throw away any lives, but at the same time he realized that, if Grisson would wait until nightfall, there might be an entirely different ending from what he had hoped. Under cover of the dark, Grisson might still slip through the net. Anyway, there was time yet. It was early and things ought to start soon. He grinned a little as he watched Brennan drag his heavy bulk over the rough ground. Crawling was not in his

line, and he was swearing when he reached Fenner. He got stiffly to his feet.

"I'll give him a chance," he said. "Then if he wants trouble he can have it."

He cupped his fat hands over his mouth and gave Grisson a shout.

"Come on out of it with your hands in the air, Grisson," he bawled. "You're fixed, sure, so take it quietly."

His voice echoed back in the still fresh air of the morning. Grisson didn't answer.

Fenner said, "He'll try an' get the girl before he goes."

"If he ain't already rubbed her out," Brennan said uneasily. "I have a hunch this case ain't goin' to break as cleanly as it might. We've had a nice run up to now."

Inside the barn Slim stood watching through the chink in the door. He held his gun tightly and his loose mouth was closed in a hunched-up mess of wet lips. It was quite true that he was short of shells. Brennan had guessed right. He had a full magazine, but that was all. He yearned for a Thompson gun. He cursed himself for being trapped like this, but he could think of nothing else he could have done, anyway. He heard Brennan call and he snarled silently. He wouldn't make it easy for the heels, he told himself savagely. He wasn't going to let himself be fried. It would be a quick bullet and he'd take some of them with him.

Upstairs in the barn Miss Blandish crouched, shivering. She realized that this was the end of the nightmare and the beginning of another one. The four months that had passed were now drawing to a close. Her dazed mind refused to look back on those months. Her body, racked and yearning for the peace of drugs, did not belong to her any more. Although she had not eaten for many hours, hunger did not torment her. She just felt weak, as if she had been very ill for a long time. With an effort she crawled over to the open trap-door and looked into the barn.

She could see Slim standing with his back to her, peeping through the barn-door. His long, thin back was tense, and she saw the dull metal of his gun as he pushed it forward. She

watched him raise the gun and shoot suddenly. The violence of the noise made her start back involuntarily. When she looked again he was standing still, and she could hear him muttering to himself. There was silence outside the barn. Her concentrated attention on his back was conveyed to him.

He turned slowly and they looked at each other. He, standing by the door, looking up, and she, lying stretched out, her head and shoulders framed by the trap-door, looking down at him. They stared at each other for a long time. His face was glistening with the sweat of fear. He looked almost phosphorescent in the dim barn. His lips came off his teeth and he swore at her, calling her obscene names, picking his words and hurling them at her in his hatred of fear. She lay there, not listening, but hoping that he would shoot her. She willed him with all the strength of her mind to raise his arm and release the bullet into her. He did nothing but glare at her with his feverish, yellow eyes. It did not cross his mind to kill her, otherwise he would have done so. His mind was gradually becoming paralysed. The obsession of sudden death was striking at his morale. This standing, looking out at the deserted litter of the farmyard, knowing that everywhere was a hidden death waiting for him, was gradually wearing down his nerve.

He jerked his gaze away from her, and looked once more into the yard. He thought he saw something move and he fired instantly. The noise of the shot echoed in the silence, and he saw the puff of dust and the white splinters of wood fly from the side of the cart behind which he had seen a movement.

Once more he heard them shouting for him to come on out. His legs began to go back on him. He felt suddenly weak and he realized how desperately he needed food, and what he would give for just one shot of liquor. His thin, wolfish, idiot's face began to crumple like a child's before it weeps. He fell on his knees, letting his hands slide down the rough wood of the door. He let his gun drop on the floor. Miss Blandish still lay and watched him. For a sickening moment she thought that he had been hit when he had slumped down, but when he

began to moan in that horrible way he had she hastily drew herself away from the trap.

Brennan, anxious to get it over, was giving orders in a low voice. Several uniformed men began to trundle a heavy cart towards the barn. They kept well behind the shelter of its heavy wooden sides, feeling that their legs were unpleasantly exposed as they moved. They kept on steadily, sweating under the labour.

Slim saw the cart coming and got to his feet. He looked hurriedly over his shoulder, but the trap-door was deserted. Then he lost his head completely. He jerked the barn door open and ran out. He held his gun forward stiffly and his ghastly face was wild with despair. He had not taken three paces in the open before the clamour of sub-machine-guns broke out from all sides. He stopped running suddenly, as if he had come up against an invisible wall. Blood suddenly appeared on his coat, and his gun slid out of his hand. The guns stopped as abruptly as they had started.

Fenner watched Grisson, standing bewildered in the bright sunshine, and saw him pitch forward. He knew before he reached him that he was dead. He cautiously turned him over with his foot. The yellow eyes looked up at him blankly; the thin, white face, upturned, looked pathetically defenceless; the loose, fleshy mouth hung open, and Fenner turned away with a little grunt of disgust.

Brennan joined him.

"It's finished," he said.

Fenner drew a deep breath, then he walked slowly towards the barn.

It struck Fenner as he sat at the wheel with Miss Blandish at his side that she had had all the bad breaks. He overlooked that she had lived a life of richness and had enjoyed the things that money could buy ever since she was old enough to appreciate them. Against the good things of life she had had four months with Grisson. Most people would have preferred a

life of drabness to that. He believed that each person had his or her prearranged destiny to live; that, though the small things came under control, the big things were plotted like the green holes on a gold course. He felt sorry for the girl, and awkward at not being able to say the right thing that might bring her comfort.

Leaving the police and Brennan at the farm, he had taken Miss Blandish away. She had not opened her mouth, nor had she looked at him after the first uncomfortable meeting. He had found her crouching in the loft. She hid her face from him as his head and shoulders appeared through the trap. He had spoken to her softly, telling her that it was finished, and that he was going to take her home. He was utterly impersonal to her, and he could see that she was glad of that. She went with him down the ladder, in her borrowed dress, looking dirty and untidy, with great blank eyes in a white mask.

Brennan had moved his men away from the barn so that no one was there to stare at her. Brennan had shown surprising human feeling. He had taken himself off too. The car had been run up close to the barn and left empty, with the engine running. Fenner wondered uneasily if they were all making too much of a tragedy out of this, whether it would not have been better to have greeted her more normally; but a quick glance at her face told him that he had done right. He did not touch her when she got into the car. He stood well back and let her sink into the seat unaided. Then he ran round and slipped under the wheel, driving off at a high speed.

When they had left the farm several miles behind, he said quite casually: "I'm takin' you to a quiet hotel. Your father's at home waitin' for you, but I guess you would like a rest an' some new clothes before you meet him."

She didn't say anything, but he saw her relax from her tense position. He drove on in silence. He could watch her reflection in the windscreen, and he saw that she was crying to herself. He guessed that she would be better in a little while.

The hotel was certainly quiet. Paula had done a good job of work. He got her upstairs without meeting anyone. The room that was prepared for her was loaded with flowers; their heavy

scent hung in the still air, and the cleanness of the room looked invitingly secure.

She walked slowly over to the window and stood looking out at the white clouds that piled up in the blue sky. One of her hands caressed the flowers, although she did not look at them.

Fenner stood quietly by the door.

"There's food over there," he said, "an' a bathroom on your right. I've got you some clothes; you'll find 'em in the cupboard. Is there anythin' else you want?"

"Get me a drink," she said in a low voice.

"Sure; what do you want?"

She said nothing. He noticed that she was pulling the flower to pieces with feverish fingers. The petals were falling on the carpet at her feet.

He walked over to the dumb waiter that stood against the wall. He selected a bottle of Scotch and poured out a small drink. He put the bottle and the glass on the table and stood back.

"Will you go away?" she said, still standing with her back turned. He could see that her shoulders were quivering.

He stepped out of the room and softly shut the door. Then he leant against the wall and gave himself a cigarette. He tilted his hat over his eyes and waited. He was patient and waited for some time. He just stood there, listening and smoking. He was uneasy about her, and wondered what he should do next. Finally he levered himself away from the wall and looked into the room again. She was still standing looking out of the window, the glass, full of raw spirit, in her hand.

"Why don't you eat?" he said, closing the door behind him and leaning against it.

"I don't want any food." Her voice was suddenly loud.

"Shall I ring your father? I guess he's anxious to know you're safe," he said after a long pause.

"No!"

"I guessed you wouldn't want that," he said.

She stood hesitating, then, over her shoulder, she said, "Why do you say that?"

"I can guess what you've been through," he said, choosing his words carefully. "You want to get adjusted to things, don't you?"

She turned slowly on her heel and stood looking at him. Her face was slightly flushed, and her eyes made him uneasy. "I don't know who you are," she said, "but you've been very kind. I want to be alone now. I've got to think. Will you come and see me tomorrow? I shall be quite ready to see Father tomorrow. I can't see anyone now." Her voice broke, and she put her hands to her eyes.

"Sure, I'll leave you," he said gently. "But, before I go, try to relax. You've got nothin' to be scared about now. Grisson's dead . . . all that's over."

She snatched her hands from her face. "No, you're wrong," she said, her voice high-pitched and hysterical. "He's not dead. He's with me now, I know he is—at first I thought I was wrong, but I know I've got him with me. He wouldn't leave me alone, ever—and he never will."

Fenner stood undecided. He blew out his cheeks and swore in his mind. He knew Blandish must handle this, and his first thought was to get him. He turned to the door and ran to the lift. Then he hesitated and turned back to the room. The door had closed behind him and, as he put his hand on the handle, he heard the lock snap to. He rapped with sudden panic, but she did not answer. He drew himself back against the wall and drove his shoulder against the door, but although it trembled it did not give. As he made another heave he heard a thin wailing scream . . . it sounded a long way away. He stopped and raised his hands helplessly, then, jerking out his gun, he shot the lock away. He pushed open the door and stood looking round the empty room.

In the street there was a sudden rush of people. A shrill whistle blasted in the still air. Cars came to a hasty standstill, and people began to push forward.

A richly dressed woman, fondling a long-eared little dog, raised her head and looked inquiringly out of her car.

"Why have you stopped?" she asked her chauffeur angrily. "You know I'm late already."

"I'm sorry, madam, but there seems to have been an accident."

She lowered the window and looked out. A tall, boneless man was watching the crowd from the kerb with a bored eye. She beckoned to him and he lounged over to her.

"What's happened?" she asked, her face showing her annoyance.

He looked at her with disapproval. "Some dame gone nuts an' tossed herself outta a window," he said.

The woman leant back into her cushions and tapped impatiently on her patent-leather bag.

"How tiresome," she said irritably. Her eyes suddenly looked hungry, and she felt an envious pang. "How disgusting of her," she said to herself. "I suppose she made a fool of herself over some man."

She was sorry when the car took her away from the curious, gaping crowd that the police held back with difficulty.

THE END

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